

The New Criterion

June 1990

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Volume 8, Number 10

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The New Criterion *June 1990*

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Brad Leithauser's third collection of poems, *The Mail from Anywhere*, is forthcoming from Knopf.

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Richard Vine wrote on Jean Baudrillard for our May 1989 issue.

Karen Wilkin's essay on David Smith and his drawings appeared in our March issue.

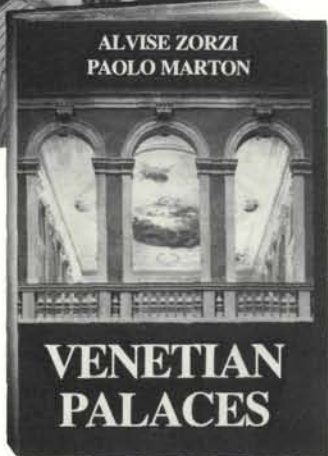
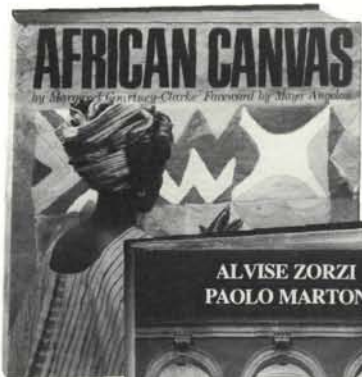
Marguerite Yourcenar (1903-1987) is the author of, among other works, the novel *Memoirs of Hadrian*. Walter Kaiser has translated her *Alexis* and *Two Lives and a Dream*.

Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. June 1990, Volume 8, Number 10. Subscriptions: \$32 for one year, \$60 for two. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send changes of address to 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. Copyright © 1990 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. U.S.A. newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 1130 Cleveland Road, Sandusky, OH 44870. British distribution by Central Books Ltd., 14 The Leathermarket, London SE1 3ER. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms International, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of issue date.

Advertising representative: Kate Shanley, 799 Broadway, Room 237, New York, NY 10003. (212) 477-4905.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman and printed by the Eastern Press of New Haven, Connecticut.

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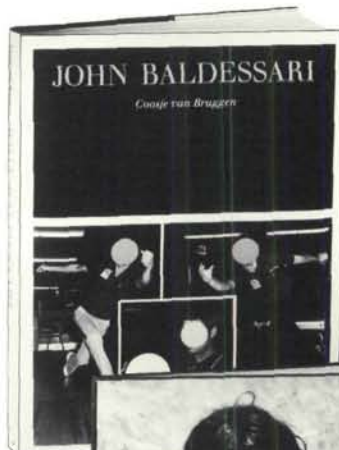
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Notes & Comments:

June 1990

Veritas?

The latest academic assault on intellectual probity comes to us from no less eminent an institution than the Harvard Law School. In April, Derrick Bell, Harvard's first black law professor, announced that he was requesting an unpaid leave of absence until a black woman was given a tenured appointment to the law faculty.

Professor Bell, who had himself been appointed to the faculty in 1969 only after noisy student demands that the university hire a black law professor, explained that he felt he could no longer serve as a role model for both black men and women. Making much of the financial sacrifice he would suffer, he portrayed his decision as a noble gesture on behalf of freedom and equity. But for anyone concerned with academic standards, with the principle that university appointments and promotions be based on merit, not on skin color or ethnic privilege, Professor Bell's protest appears as yet another example of the extent to which political imperatives are swamping the traditional ideals of intellectual achievement and scholarly distinction in the academy.

Initially at least, Harvard's response to Professor Bell's one-man affirmative-action campaign has been cautiously principled. Robert C. Clark, dean of the law school, was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying that "the law school faculty should make appointments based on the merits of each case, not because

of protests. We do have high standards, and we aren't going to compromise them." Lest he go too far in offending Professor Bell's many partisans, however, Dean Clark also noted that over the past ten years, almost half of all new faculty members at the law school had been women or minorities. A Harvard department chairman, who spoke on the condition that he remain anonymous, told the *Times* that "the notion of appointing someone under an ultimatum is anathema—it goes against academic freedom and what Harvard is all about." No doubt. But what does it tell us about Harvard's vaunted academic freedom that one of its more distinguished faculty members feels he must cloak his outrage in anonymity?

One Harvard law student, a black woman, charged that Dean Clark's position was "highly insulting to blacks and points to the elitism of Harvard." The "elitism of Harvard"? Well, yes, we suppose Harvard must still be considered an elite institution if anything is. That, of course, is precisely why this self-righteous woman wishes to study law there. And as for Dean Clark's position being insulting to blacks: would she prefer that blacks and other minorities be recruited on a basis other than merit?

The real issue is summed up in Harvard's venerable motto, *Veritas*: Is the Harvard law School on the side of truth? Or is it willing to sacrifice truth for political expediency? "The problem is," as another law student put it (a white male, incidentally), "you can't tell the truth around here anymore without being accused of being a racist."

A Pulitzer for—what?

This spring, after the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry was awarded to a volume of prose—Charles Simic's *The World Doesn't End*—an open letter questioning the legitimacy of the award was sent to the Pulitzer Board. Written by the poet Louis Simpson, this letter raises an issue which we believe to be important.

The issue is whether a prize specifically designated in the official "provisions" of the Pulitzer Prizes "for a distinguished volume of verse by an American author" can be legitimately conferred upon a volume of prose. The implied insult to the art of verse is unmistakable in this blatant repudiation of the regulation governing the award, and it is an insult made all the more galling by the fact that the Pulitzer Prizes are, by the terms of the will of the first Joseph Pulitzer, administered by Columbia University. In condoning the award, Columbia has lent whatever remains of its intellectual authority in these matters to an historic obliteration of the distinction traditionally made between verse and prose.

Mr. Simpson's open letter to the Pulitzer Prize board reads as follows:

This year a Pulitzer Prize was awarded for a book of "prose poems." No award was made for verse. Does not a rule of the Pulitzer Prizes state that the prize for poetry is to be awarded for a book of verse? Has the rule been changed? If so, readers and writers of verse would like to know why. If it has not been changed, the Board appears to have been irresponsible.

Have you thought of the consequence of awarding the prize for verse to a book of prose? If in the future a publisher submits a book of short stories for the prize in poetry, a book of essays, a "poetic" biography or history, on what grounds will you say that it is ineligible?

There are several Pulitzer Prizes for prose. You have taken the one prize that was open to writers of verse and awarded that also to a book of prose.

You have, in fact, eliminated the prize for verse. Why?

In a letter responding to this complaint, the administrator of the Pulitzer Prizes, Robert C. Christopher, readily acknowledged that Mr. Simpson was entirely correct in saying the Pulitzer Plan for Award states that the prize shall be awarded to "a distinguished volume of verse." Mr. Christopher pointed out, however, that it has been the practice of the Pulitzer board to describe the award as one for poetry rather than for verse, and that "prose poems" have long been a "recognized form." Presumably, Mr. Christopher does not go so far as to claim that prose poems are a recognized form of verse.

He also points out that the Pulitzer board attaches "great weight" to the recommendations of its advisory committee on poetry, which this year consisted of Helen Vendler, Garrett Hongo, and Charles Wright. This committee is reported to have recommended three "finalists" for this year's Pulitzer award, and we may be fairly confident that the two who lost out were represented by volumes of verse.

The resulting decision to bypass the art of verse in favor of a book of prose cannot be regarded as an innocent one. Everyone who follows these matters knows that the crucial issue in poetry today involves an argument about form—about the use or rejection of metrical structures in the writing of poetry. What has been described in these pages as "metrical illiteracy" has long made a good deal of what passes for American poetry a literary wasteland. That this phenomenon of metrical illiteracy has been tolerated and even encouraged by university writing programs is also well known. By lending its weight to the destructive side of this debate about poetic form, the Pulitzer board has not only subverted the provisions of its award for verse but has done considerable harm to the art of poetry. Surely this was not what the Pulitzer Prize was originally intended to do.

The function of criticism: some Polish examples

by Hilton Kramer

Our planet, which gets smaller every year with its fantastic proliferation of mass media, is witnessing a process that escapes definition, characterized by a refusal to remember. Certainly, the illiterates of past centuries, then an enormous majority of mankind, knew little of the history of their respective countries and of their civilization. In the mind of modern illiterates, however, who know how to read and write and even teach in schools and at universities, history is present but blurred, in a state of strange confusion. Molière becomes a contemporary of Napoleon, Voltaire a contemporary of Lenin.

Moreover, events of the last decades, of such primary importance that knowledge or ignorance of them will be decisive for the future of mankind, move away, grow pale, lose all consistency, as if Friedrich Nietzsche's prediction of European nihilism found a literal fulfillment. "The eye of a nihilist," he wrote in 1887, "is unfaithful to his memories: it allows them to drop, to lose their leaves . . . And what he does not do for himself, he also does not do for the whole past of mankind: he lets it drop."

—Czeslaw Milosz, in his Nobel Prize lecture (1980)

Now that the initial euphoria that greeted the downfall of Communism in Eastern Europe has somewhat abated and we are still in the first stages of assessing the terrible wreckage that this totalitarian system inflicted on the societies that fell under its devastating rule, it is important that we also take account of what it was in these ill-fated

societies that Communism did *not* succeed in destroying. It is important that we do this for two reasons, one having to do with Eastern Europe's future and the other having to do with ours. If, as we have ample reason to believe, the East is now looking to the West for its models of political life and economic development, it may nonetheless also be the case that the West has something to learn from the East—or certain parts of it, anyway—about what it was in the realm of culture that managed to survive the long ordeal of Communist rule. For one of the things that Communism did not succeed in completely destroying in Eastern Europe was the life of the mind and that whole realm of cultural memory upon which it depends for its vitality and survival. Let us make no mistake about it: great damage was done and immense suffering inflicted; it will not do to make a romance of what was lost to the cultural life of Eastern Europe in this terrible period of its history. Many writers, artists, scholars, and intellectuals were arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and shot; many perished in the camps, and many others were spiritually destroyed by the unremitting pressures of mendacity, corruption, and coercion that were the common lot in every sphere of existence. For those who endured, the very language of art and thought was deformed and traduced. Yet what survived, often under conditions of privation, imprisonment, or expatriation, was nonetheless that memory of and reverence for the

high culture of the European past that is now, by a ghastly irony of history, under such virulent attack in our own free society.

I have been reminded of this peculiar contrast in our respective attitudes toward the cultural legacy of the European past—a legacy that has shaped so much that is fundamental to the development of high culture in our own country—by a remarkable and timely volume entitled *Four Decades of Polish Essays*.¹ Edited by Jan Kott and containing essays by, among others, Stanisław Barańczak, Józef Czapski, Witold Gombrowicz, Zbigniew Herbert, K. A. Jeleński, Leszek Kolakowski, Czesław Miłosz, Aleksander Wat, and Mr. Kott himself, this book takes us into a world of thought so distant from our own that it seems at times to belong not only to a history far removed from ours but to the culture of another planet. At every turn in our cultural life today we encounter mandarin academics preaching the gospel of deconstruction when they are not offering up reasons to jettison the study of classic writers—most of whom, as these academic ideologues never tire of reminding us, are dead white European males—in favor of authors and subjects belonging to a more politically acceptable mix of races and sexes. But here in Mr. Kott's anthology are voices that speak in every breath of those same classic writers with a clear sense of kinship, gratitude, and spiritual solidarity. There is no note of false cultural piety in what these voices have to tell us about themselves and about the books that were sometimes their only remaining link to a civilization then in the process of being terrorized and crushed. The great writers of the past who are invoked in these essays define the very terms of existence for these authors, and do so in certain cases under the most extreme conditions. Here, for example, in this volume's opening essay

is Jerzy Stempowski's account of the books that, by sheer happenstance, came into his hands during the war while he was hiding out in the Carpathian Mountains in order, as he says, "to avoid contact with the two occupying armies that had invaded my country." It is winter, the first winter of the Second World War, and his "lonely shelter [is] surrounded by snowdrifts." He is weak, still recovering from an illness. Someone brings a bag of books to him in his hideout.

When the room warmed up [he writes] I untied the bag and started to take out the books. The first to appear was a good edition of Horace, then the *Metamorphoses*, Virgil's *Bucolics* and *Georgics*, and some Latin poets of the Renaissance. Next there came some Spanish publications, mostly from the time of the Civil War, although they included Gracián y Morales. At the very bottom of the sack I found the English romantics—Southey, Coleridge—and also several volumes of Walter Scott, *Pride and Prejudice*, and a slightly worn copy of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.

Then, with a poignant simplicity, Stempowski writes: "It was the best kind of reading for the long winter."

For Stempowski, this reading is intimately linked to what he speaks of, with obvious anguish, as "the question of memory . . . a constant source of pain." "Owing to illness and exhaustion," he writes, "there were huge gaps in my recollection." For this reason he hesitates half an hour before opening Horace. "Did I still remember Latin, or would this book be just a mockery of my crippled memory?" He goes on: "The time spent with the books was an attempt to reclaim my past—a random burrowing in dark, crumbling passages." His Latin proves to be sufficient, and it is mainly to the *Bucolics* and *Georgics* that he turns his attention. "Both books were quite familiar to me," he writes. "I often pondered about their structure and their timelessness, reflected in the stream of imitations and borrowings continuing until the present time." But this reading also serves to illuminate his

1 *Four Decades of Polish Essays*, edited by Jan Kott and translated by Jarosław Anders, Jadwiga Kosicka, Richard Lourie, Lillian Vallee, and others; Northwestern University Press, 403 pages, \$29.95; \$14.95 paper.

immediate situation. In his hideout, he writes, "I was struck for the first time by the realistic and psychological content of the *Bucolics*. An exile departing from his native land instinctively clings to the soil, absorbs it with his eyes as if to preserve it forever in memory This perspective is the secret of Virgil and the source of the timeless appeal of the *Bucolics*." This reading in Virgil also strengthens his resolve to go into exile. "I was about to move west, and I was aware that I was seeing for the last time a fragment of Eastern Europe that had been shrinking under my feet for a quarter of a century. I wanted to preserve a clear, Virgilian picture of the part still accessible to me." Stempowski begins this essay by posing the question, "Which of the books read during the war impressed me most?" But in the end the memory of an entire civilization is invoked as a source of inspiration in the struggle for survival.

Something similar occurs in the fragment of Aleksander Wat's memoirs that is included here under the title "Reading Proust in Lubyanka." The entire book from which this fragment is drawn—*My Century*, the volume of reminiscences that Wat, himself a distinguished poet, recorded with Czeslaw Milosz toward the close of his life²—is essential reading for anyone attempting to understand the relation of politics and culture in Poland from the Twenties down to the present day. Wat had begun his literary career as a Dadaist poet intent upon writing off the entire legacy of European civilization as hopelessly compromised and decadent. He had then suspended all poetic activity in order to serve as the editor of a Communist literary journal. He had never been a member of the party, but he had nonetheless worked as an ardent supporter of its interests—a commitment that made him a marked man when Stalin launched his purge of the Polish

Communists. It was in the Lubyanka prison, in Moscow, that Wat rediscovered the meaning of the culture he had been ready to consign to oblivion as a committed revolutionist. "[T]he books I read in Lubyanka made for one of the greatest experiences of my life," he tells us. "Not because they allowed me an escape but because, to a certain extent, they transformed me, influenced and shaped me greatly. It was the way I read those books; I came at them from a completely new angle. And from then on I had a completely new understanding, not only of literature but of everything."

And what were those books? There was the first volume of Proust's novel, about which Wat speaks with an almost religious intensity:

Swann's Way did not emerge diminished from that reading. Quite the contrary, I was more charmed than ever before by the power of its energy, its beauty of movement. The poetry in *Swann's Way* made everything intimate, an "inward vibration," and was all the more unusual in that it played off the outermost layers, the epidermis of the sensibility. And what was of more importance to me was that in its experience of time past, the book was, first and foremost, a state of constant agony in which nothing had yet died but everything was dying. An unbroken moment suspended between life and death, a final breath hellishly protracted beyond all measure—it is that alone that gives the book its depth and stirs the reader to his depths; without this, Proust's entire work would be no more than an enormous fresco of vanity, in both senses of the word. While reading *Swann's Way*, I began to discover a model for the agony I was suffering in prison, and Proust's long sentences and time periods recaptured their original power for me. An exchange of form and power—the archetypal relationship between author and reader. As if in mockery, it was everything flimsy about Proust—his quasi-Balzacian side, his descriptions of human life in "decadent capitalism"—that Anatoly Lunacharsky praised in his introduction and that was seen as the sole justification for publishing the

2 Aleksander Wat's *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*, edited and translated by Richard Lourie with a foreword by Czeslaw Milosz, was published by the University of California Press in 1988.

book. Like all Marxist critics, Lunacharsky, the last of the Bolshevik aesthetes, did not write about the work itself but treated it as a sociological "trot." When reading his introduction, I realized that I was repelled as much by Communism's reduction of everything to the flat and the linear as by its atrocities.

By the way, the clichés used in introductions by Marxists—"subjectively reactionary but objectively progressive"; "a genius conditioned by the limitations of his time" or "his class," and so on—are sordid and arrogant, but, after all, they have saved and continue to save literature in those countries where, as Gobineau put it, "the inquisitor functions as a critic."

Wat also read Machiavelli, whose writings brought him another kind of illumination and reconciliation:

Machiavelli, in the Academy edition, was also in that first batch of books. Not long after that I happened on a large selection of his letters, a prerevolutionary edition containing his correspondence and a detailed biography . . . That book came to me at just the right moment. On the dunghill of Zamarstynów I had trained myself in hatred and disgust for politics, all and any. We had seen its ugly pockmarked face; it had come to the old refined city of Lwów from the Bolshevik steppes, the plains of Muscovy, and that was the source of our suffering. We heaped abuse on the politics of Poland, on the politics of the West, embroiled in a thousand petty intrigues like those that tore Machiavelli's Italy apart, that weakness that had helped give rise to two monstrous waves of barbarism.

It would be an exaggeration to say that reading Machiavelli in Lubyanka cured me of the hatred and disgust for politics I had acquired in Zamarstynów. That still comes back in me to this day and sometimes literally chokes me and makes me stammer; to write on political subjects is torture for me, but I was always doomed to have to speak my piece. The power and glory of reading come from those moments of illumination, when it clarifies the

obscure, when it breaks things into their parts, but it is powerless against strong feelings. Once strong feelings have taken root in us, reading can only influence the direction they grow in, inhibiting or enhancing them, raising them to a higher level. Reading Machiavelli restored my equilibrium; I regained my sense of proportion and distinction albeit sporadically—and what more could I have asked for? I learned to distinguish between politics as collective fate and as political instrument. Machiavelli showed me politics against a different sky, against stars that could not be seen from prison.

Of his reading in Lubyanka, Wat concludes that "it marshaled my intellectual and spiritual resources and made me stronger. It truly was like touching the earth for Antaeus."

It is not only the classic writers of the past, moreover, who come under re-examination in some of these essays, but the art and culture of the modernist avant-garde with which so many of the contributors to this volume have had a close connection. On this subject the outstanding essay is K. A. Jeleński's "Avant-Garde and Revolution," which is at once an historical account of the Russian avant-garde (Malevich, Tatlin, et al.) and an inquiry into the reason why the much-vaunted alliance between Communism and abstract art in the early years of the Bolshevik regime was destined to be shattered. "Lunacharsky," he writes, "was often summoned by Lenin, who was interested in art, but solely for its potential utility as an instrument of propaganda. Lenin's observations about art . . . display a 'common sense' typical of the intelligentsia of the time: 'I'm totally incapable of regarding the products of expressionism, futurism, cubism, and other "isms" as expressions of a superior artistic genius. I don't understand it or derive any joy from it.'" Then Jeleński adds: "But the avant-garde did not cease to flourish because of the public incomprehension or bureaucratic mistrust. The implementation of the New Economic

Policy and the growing influence of the Red Army were the more immediate causes of its decline.”

Jeleński also has some brilliant observations to make about that other movement that allied itself with political revolution—Surrealism, which in this essay is translated as “superrealism.”

The superrealists’ protests against a rampart of values circumscribing man’s freedom led them to join hands with the Communists. They appealed to Marx, who destroyed the world of value, as well as to Freud, who erased man’s conventional understanding of himself. In their mythology, the dark shadow of the Marquis de Sade is cast upon Lenin’s fatherly smile. Superrealism is the only intellectual movement to take the Revolution seriously while harboring no illusions about human nature. For superrealists, the slogan “freedom” truly meant freedom, and not merely another form of order. It is therefore not surprising that the rebellious superrealist art, which went to the core of man’s innermost inhibitions, was unacceptable to Communists.

That chilling image of “the dark shadow of the Marquis de Sade . . . cast upon Lenin’s fatherly smile” is not one that is easily forgotten. In all that has been written on this side of the Atlantic about the philosophy and politics and aesthetics of Surrealism, nothing more vividly defines the essence of the Surrealist spirit.

One could go on quoting from this collection of essays for a long time. Józef Czapski, a painter, writing about Bonnard in an essay called “Paradise Lost,” Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz on Dostoevsky, Bolesław Miciński’s literary meditation on Kant, Zygmunt Kubiak on Pascal and Saint Augustine, Leszek Kolakowski on modernity—these and other works in this book define a level of criticism and reflection and historical awareness that is now utterly absent from our own contemporary critical literature. These Polish essayists are writers on such intimate terms with the great minds of the past and so completely disabused about the kind of ideological illusions that still hold so many of our own writers and intellectuals in thrall that the book has the effect of leaving one embarrassed and ashamed of the shambles that has been made of our own cultural life. What Czesław Miłosz called “history . . . present but blurred, in a state of strange confusion” in his Nobel Prize lecture (which is also included in this book) is actually too delicate a way of describing our condition of cultural catastrophe. Whatever may now be in store for the suffering societies of Eastern Europe, in writing of the kind that Jan Kott has brought together in this book we are reminded of something precious that survived the dark night of history over there and that we are in grave danger of obliterating by our actions over here.

C. S. Lewis, schoolboy among the moderns *by Claude Rawson*

A. N. Wilson's life of C. S. Lewis comes only a year or so after George B. Sayer's *Jack: C. S. Lewis and His Times*.¹ It is at least the fourth substantial biography of Lewis to have appeared in recent years. It does not add a great deal of "hard" information, though there are some valuable memories collected from conversations Wilson has had with friends and acquaintances of Lewis and a vividly independent reappraisal of the known facts. Perhaps it should be called a biographical portrait rather than a full-scale biography. It is adequately documented, but you would not go to it as to a reference book. Indeed, none of the existing biographies is exactly *that*, and Wilson's is much the most freshly written of them all.

It is structured on a simplified Freudian model, unpretentious and sensitively handled, which attaches great importance to Lewis's early loss of his mother and to his complex and difficult relations with his father after the mother's death. The mysterious relationship with Mrs. Moore, the mother of a friend killed in the First World War, with whom Lewis lived until the end of her life, falls naturally within this scheme—as does his marriage, late in his own life, to a woman who, like his mother when he last knew her, was the mother of two small boys and dying of cancer. Wilson

believes that Mrs. Moore was Lewis's lover, while there is an opposite view, chiefly identified with Walter Hooper, that Lewis was a virgin all his life and never even consummated his marriage to Joy Davidman. Wilson's account is the more credible, but Lewis erected barriers of secrecy and mystification round this relationship, even against his brother, in whom he normally confided freely: "On the only occasion when Warnie tried to probe Jack on the origin or true nature of his relationship with Minto," Wilson writes, "he was shut up with great vehemence." (Mrs. Moore was called Minto after a candy she was fond of.) As Lewis said in his own autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*: "one huge and complex episode will be omitted. I have no choice about this reticence. All I can or need say is that my earlier hostility to the emotions was very fully and variously avenged." There were powerful social and professional reasons for secrecy, certainly in the early years of academic aspiration and in an Oxford only slowly emerging from centuries of imposed celibacy. But these do not explain the fraught language and the reverberant mystification of an autobiographical volume published in 1955.

An elderly Canadian professor who had been a Rhodes scholar around 1940 told me recently that he had visited Lewis and his mother at home. When I told him that Lewis's mother had died in 1908, he told me he distinctly remembered the woman being

1 C. S. Lewis: *A Biography*, by A. N. Wilson; Norton, 334 pages, \$22.50. George B. Sayer's *Jack* was published in 1988 by Harper & Row.

called Mother. George Sayer reports a similar experience when he first visited Lewis at home as an undergraduate. He took it in his stride: "Like his other pupils, I thought it completely normal in those days that a woman, probably a widow, would make a home for a young bachelor. We had no difficulty accepting her, even when we came to realize that she was not his mother."

Lewis's brother Warnie was less inclined to see this as unproblematic: "Jack commonly referred to Mrs. Moore as 'my mother'—not always with any explicit indication that the relationship was conventional and adoptive." Another person who had to come to terms with Jack Lewis's ambiguous position as Mrs. Moore's "son" was a young girl called June Flewett, who was "billeted" on their household in the war and fell in love with Lewis: by a bizarrerie of fate, she eventually became Freud's granddaughter-in-law through her marriage to the English politician Clement Freud. Lewis's habit of calling Mrs. Moore Mother is one which none of his close associates seems to have been clear about. It was obviously not a simple disguise since it was practiced among people who knew that that was not their relationship. For the same reason, it couldn't be expected to allay suspicions of "abnormality." It was nevertheless a "concealment" of sorts, but one which was simultaneously a species of display. The flaunted mystification seems to have been a tease through which Lewis could act out some sort of mother-son relation without having to reveal its specific nature. It's hard to imagine that anyone would have taken simple reticence as more suggestive of impropriety than this pantomime of unclarified hints.

Mrs. Moore is connected, in Wilson's account, with Lewis's strong habit of submissiveness in the matter of household chores. Warnie had noted her imposition on Jack of "a heavy burden of minor domestic tasks," and seems to have seen this more as a sign of her "extreme unsuitability" than as a symptom of Jack's psychopathology. Other witnesses record a surprising readiness on

Lewis's part to be bossed and scolded by women—a trait he shared, I suspect knowingly, with Samuel Johnson, for whom he had a deep admiration and whose behavior and mannerisms he imitated. The pleasure in being disciplined or punished may have been "masochistic." One of the few things we know from his own pen about his sexual predilections is that he enjoyed fantasies of whipping, though his preference seems to have been mainly for the active rather than the passive role. Wilson cites at least twice a comment Lewis made to his boyhood friend and lifelong correspondent Arthur Greeves about Rousseau's *Confessions*: "His taste is altogether for suffering rather than inflicting: which I can feel too . . ." The real force of this, in the context of the adolescent letters to Greeves, is that Lewis is *mainly* of the "inflicting" disposition, and his correspondence generally is given to eruptions of fantasy, both erotic and punitive, about whipping female bottoms. The alternative or "suffering" taste was not only subsidiary in him, but, he added, "more proper to the other sex": this may have been one of Lewis's reminders to the homosexual Greeves that he himself wasn't.

Speculation as to whether Lewis had significant homosexual inclinations is not encouraged by either of Lewis's most recent biographers. George Sayer disputed any erotic connection with Greeves, and Lewis's voluminous letters to Greeves, which are very open about the sexual predilections of both of them, consistently dwell on difference: "you are interested in a brand of *That* which doesn't appeal to me, and I in one that doesn't appeal to you." He never scorned or derided Greeves, and his occasional admonitions to Greeves on the responsibilities and obligations of love, whether outside or within what he called "ordinary sexual arrangements," have about them a relaxed wisdom, a maturity and a moral delicacy, which are remarkable by any standards and must be highly exceptional in a correspondence between adolescents.

Lewis had much of the clubby misogyny encouraged by the schoolboy and bachelor-

don subcultures which he never outgrew. Commentators more committed to psychobiography than Wilson is will doubtless raise a knowing eyebrow at the somewhat vehement declaration in *Surprised by Joy* about buggery at the boys' school he called "Belsen," that the "vice in question" was "one to which I had never been tempted, and which, indeed, I still find opaque to the imagination." But his utterances on the subject have a bluff burgherly worldliness that doesn't immediately suggest repressed anguish, though it might displease some in the sensitized atmosphere of today. He wrote in 1960, when this was an issue, about the idiocy of treating homosexuality as criminal. That, he said, "cures nothing and only creates a blackmailer's paradise." But he impenitently constated that a person with his views

is fighting on two fronts. *a.* For the persecuted Homo. against snoopers and busybodies. *b.* For ordinary people *against* the widespread freemasonry of the highbrow Homos who dominate so much of the world of criticism, and won't be v. nice to you unless you are in their set.

The nomenclature is no more pleasant to read, in an altered climate, than older uses of "nigger" by, say, Huckleberry Finn, and the passage may seem otherwise distressing, but it is not self-evidently fraught with self-implication or buried guilt. And he could be amusing, as he was amusing about "cuckolds." When Roy Campbell told Lewis his wife was having a lesbian affair, he exclaimed, "Fancy being cuckolded by a woman!" Sayer has a story of the Lewis brothers watching "two brightly dressed aesthetes walking arm in arm together. Warren remarked that in spite of all their plumage, he thought them quite an ugly pair. Jack replied, 'Well, buggers can't be choosers.'" (In Wilson's biography, this story is not reproduced, and the *mot* is instead attributed to the famous homosexual don Sir Maurice Bowra, said to be commenting on "becoming engaged to a rather 'difficult' woman.") It's a rather

curious irony that there is at least one photograph of Lewis, taken at Stonehenge by Warnie in 1925 and most recently reproduced in Sayer's book, which reveals a surprising resemblance to some portraits of Oscar Wilde, a fellow Irishman who had once been a member of Lewis's Oxford college. But it does not make Jack look like an aesthete: the burly alertness, a kind of keen-eyed grossness, hair parted in the middle, thick sensuous lips, cigarette in hand, suggest instead that there might have been a "Heavy Lewis" potential in Wilde.

If, like Rousseau, Lewis could imagine the pleasures of being whipped and thought of them as feminine, some assimilation of this to the more domesticated submissiveness of doing household chores for Minto might seem tempting to interpreters of the more reductive sort. It's characteristic of Wilson that he doesn't make a production of this, though he does suggest the connection. More enlighteningly, he relates the pleasure in household chores to a passage in the *Allegory of Love*, Lewis's first, most controversial, and most brilliant work of literary criticism: "to leap up on errands, to go through heat or cold, at the bidding of one's lady, or even of any lady, would seem but honourable and natural to a gentleman of the thirteenth or even of the seventeenth century; and most of us have gone shopping in the twentieth with ladies who showed no sign of regarding the tradition as a dead letter." This, I think, is a *trouvaille*, worth all the labors of psychobiography put together, bringing home with particular immediacy the directness of the relation for Lewis between literary criticism and quotidian experience: both in the sense that the criticism was rooted in the quotidian, and that the quotidian was experienced through the perceptions of the critic. It suggests the kind of natural, informal two-way traffic between life and letters that seems to have characterized the meetings of the group called the Inklings.

Lewis's ambition was to be a writer, and especially a poet, but it is arguable that his

creative gifts were most vitally expressed in critical discourse. At a time when his popular theology, his children's stories, and his feeble and pompous space-fictions are the objects of faddish cults, Wilson is one of the few commentators to see Lewis as most finely represented in his literary criticism. "For me," he writes, "the most attractive Lewis is the author of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, a fluent, highly intelligent man talking about books in a manner which is always engaging Reading the book, you feel you know what it is like to hear him talk." He is very clear-eyed about Lewis's juvenilia: "his childish fantasies are really rather dull. What sets them apart is their fluency, and the fact that they reveal him as a precise, attentive reader." One of the persistent threads of his biography is that the Lewis who was grooming himself for a career as a novelist or poet was actually developing distinction as a critic.

In the 1920s, both he and Minto were "preparing for Lewis the great romantic poet to burst upon the world," and even as Lewis struggled to gain his first academic job, both expressed anxiety lest the academic career might stifle the creative soul. That it in fact provided the channel for his best talent is ironic, though both the experience of imaginative work and the defeated aspiration may actually have sharpened the edge of his criticism. Lewis was in any case the kind of critic who, again like Johnson, derived his power less from the rightness of his judgments than from the passion and insight that went into their making, from the centrality of the issues he raised and the boldness and baldness with which he raised them. His hostility to the humanists of the Renaissance, or to Donne or Dryden, or to virtually the whole modern movement is not shared by all admirers of his criticism, but even his most perverse judgments are vitalizing provocations to re-examine first principles and question received ideas. Like Johnson, Lewis had the courage of his passions and his wrongnesses, and a wise readiness to be inconsistent. Wilson cites the notorious comment in *Surprised by Joy* about

how, "having manfully struggled on to the last line of *Don Juan*, [he] wrote on the end-leaf 'Never again,'" and comments that "it is odd to find Byron boring." But Lewis also said in "Shelley, Dryden, and Mr. Eliot," that "I admire Congreve, I delight in Prior and still more in *Don Juan*," and paid Byron the compliment of imitating his idiom in his own most ambitious longer poem, *Dymer* (1926), as George Sayer is one of the few to have noticed.

The first Canto of *Dymer* is full of Byronic cadences ("This people were so pure, so law abiding, / So logical, they made the heavens afraid") and has other touches reminiscent of the narrative manner of *Don Juan* and Byron's other *ottava rima* poems. But *Dymer* is in fact written not in *ottava rima*, but in rhyme-royal, the seven-line stanza that Auden used ten years later in "A Letter to Lord Byron," a slightly tighter form well-adapted to combining a Byronic idiom of relaxed ironic commentary with a more concentrated style of satiric summation. And a more surprising feature of Lewis's poem is its occasional resemblance not to Byron himself but to a style that Auden later created partly out of his own encounter with Byron's verse:

At Dymer's birth no comets scared the nation,
The public crèche engulfed him with the rest,
And twenty separate Boards of Education
Closed round him. He was passed through
every test,
Was vaccinated, numbered, washed and
dressed,
Proctored, inspected, whipt, examined
weekly,
And for some nineteen years he bore it
meekly.

The resemblance to Auden is striking, and proleptic. In language, meter, mood, and sentiment the lines are closer to the satirical sonnets of Auden's "In Time of War" (1939) and "The Quest" (1940) even than they are to the "Letter to Lord Byron." *Dymer* was published under the pseudonym Clive Hamilton on September 20, 1926, when

Auden had just completed his first year as an undergraduate at Oxford and Lewis his first year as a Fellow of Magdalen College. There seems to be no record of their knowing each other at this time. Lewis was tutor to John Betjeman, who knew Auden and his set and (on January 24, 1927) introduced Louis MacNeice to Lewis as a "great poet": Lewis, who was slow to discover that he himself wasn't going to be a "great poet," was hostile to poets and found MacNeice "absolutely silent and astonishingly ugly." Auden seems partially to have escaped Lewis's lifelong distaste for modern poets. In 1935 Lewis welcomed Auden's revival of some of the stylistic features of the English alliterative line. When in 1947 Lewis broke off a reading of a poem by Eliot, declaring it to be "bilge," fellow Inklings defended Eliot on the grounds that he wasn't obliged to be another Maschfield or another Auden. This implies that Auden had Lewis's approval then, and they were on friendly terms in Lewis's later years (at the very end, Lewis was even friendly with Eliot).

In these later years, they had their Christianity in common, and there were other predisposing factors. Auden's interest in alliterative meter and in Old English verse had been fired by hearing Tolkien quote *Beowulf* in lectures (rather than by the lectures themselves), and he later became a devoted admirer of the fictions of Tolkien and Charles Williams, both of them close associates of Lewis. But the arresting thing about *Dymer* in 1926 is that it not only resembles but prefigures elements in the work of an experimental socialist poet whose early career was to be antithetical to almost everything Lewis valued. That their poetic idioms converged through a common derivation from Byron is not in itself as surprising as the fact that what they wrote was in tone and outlook so much closer each to the other than either was to Byron—or to anyone else. Try the passages I have quoted, or several similar ones, on any experienced reader who doesn't know *Dymer* and see who is identified as the author.

Despite differences in age and back-

ground, Lewis and Auden were both men who never outgrew their school days. Both loved heroic literature in a way which derived from this. They shared a feeling for schoolboy prowess and the codes of epic and saga, where valor and thuggishness are not always easy to distinguish. They also saw a deep analogy between school life and political tyranny. Both entered their manhood in a period when the menace of totalitarian government was beginning to exercise a particularly strong pressure on the imagination of writers. Lewis said in the Preface to the 1950 edition of his poem that he put into "the Platonic and totalitarian state from which *Dymer* escapes . . . my hatred of my old public school and my more recent hatred of the army." The convergence of Fascism and School which we associate with Auden and Isherwood was anticipated by Lewis with some differences in the distribution of ambivalent feelings: the schoolboy nostalgias, for example, are less visible in the older writer, who later called one of his schools "Belsen." It is not a mixture Lewis carried well. He returned to it, or a variant of it in which resentments of schoolboy tyrannies are redirected at a corrupt mafia of power-hungry college dons, in *That Hideous Strength* (1945), a work which anticipates some aspects of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949), as *Dymer* anticipates Auden, with less power in each case. Lewis's 1950 Preface doesn't mention these, though it shows an intriguing awareness of having preceded some anti-totalitarian dystopias and socialist novels which subsequently came to be better known:

Some may be surprised at the strength of the anti-totalitarian feeling in a poem written so long ago. I had not read *Brave New World* or *Land Under England* or *The Aerodrome*: nor had we yet tasted the fruits of a planned economy in our own lives. This should be a warning for critics who attempt to date ancient texts too exactly on that kind of internal evidence.

The oddly donnish consideration at the end is deeply characteristic of Lewis, similar to

the habit of giving praise, however extracurricular, in a vocabulary of alphas and betas: "I jolly well have read Gombrich and give him alpha with as many plusses as you please."

"The anti-totalitarian feeling" which in *Dymer* had been directed both at the "Platonic" or proto-fascist state into which the hero is born, and at the revolutionary excesses which replace it (mainly "the Russian Revolution"), is extended in the 1950 Preface to the benign and unmurderous government which was then setting up the Welfare State in Britain. The remark about "the fruits of a planned economy in our own lives" was made in the same year as a conversation in which Lewis took part under the delusion that Tito was the King of Greece. The equation is on a par with the feeling in *That Hideous Strength* that a totalitarian takeover of Britain would be a largely collegiate affair. That novel gives a peculiarly literal application to the idea that Lewis's politics had an unreality that was itself irredeemably donnish.

In 1926, when *Dymer* was published, Lewis had only recently become a don, and the poem was begun much earlier. But like most of what Lewis wrote it was already conceived in collegiate terms. The parable of revolution in *Dymer* actually begins at a lecture when the hero, then a student, breaks discipline. A breeze and the sight of a bird awake the lyrical and non-regimented side of his nature, and he permits himself to laugh at the droning lecturer. When the latter orders silence, "he struck the lecturer's head. / The old man tittered, lurched and dropped down dead." This is comic, and may even be meant to be, but from this point Dymer embarks on an allegorical journey of lugubrious solemnity. It takes him through an imaginary landscape, furnished from "the Hesperian or Western Garden system, mainly derived from Euripides, Milton, Morris, and the early Yeats," supplemented by Wagner and a starched variety of latter-day sun-worshipping paganism:

Socks, jacket, shirt and breeches off he peeled

And rose up mother-naked with no shield
Against the sun.

The liberation of the body is, in the fashion of the time, bound up with the political interest. Dymer mates with an archetypal damsel from Romantic quest-allegories: "the breathing body of a girl / Slid into" his open arms. But the accompanying suggestions of fulfillment and fertility are fraught with menace:

The same night swelled the mushroom in
earth's lap
And silvered the wet fields: it drew the bud
From hiding and led on the rhythmic sap
And sent the young wolves thirsting after
blood . . .

Later in the poem, there is a phantasmagoric allegory of lust, remarkable for its blending of ancient orgiastic revelries and of hell-scapes and dream-visions, with an unlovely parody of modern neo-primitivisms (the cult of tribal drums, jazz-age syncopations, hideously defiled rites of spring):

That moment in a cloud among the trees
Wild music and the glare of torches came.
On sweated faces, on the prancing knees
Of shaggy satyrs fell the smokey flame,
On ape and goat and crawlers without name,
On rolling breast, black eyes and tossing hair,
On old bald-headed witches, lean and bare.

They beat the devilish tom-tom rub-a-dub;
Lunging, leaping, in unwieldy romp,
Singing Cotytto and Beelzebub,
With devil-dancers' mask and phallic pomp,
Torn raw with briers and caked from many
a swamp,
They came, among the wild flowers dripping
blood
And churning the green mosses into mud.

This comes in a dream Dymer relates to the old Magician whom Lewis partly modeled, as he tells us, on Yeats.

After their mystic union, Dymer searches for the girl everywhere but apparently never

sees her again. His progress is impeded by an enveloping monster, engulfingly maternal, whom he calls Mother, as Lewis called Mrs. Moore Mother, and who seems to obstruct his quest for his "loved one, live and dear." Dymer's pursuit of his lost love, though disappointed and indeed disfigured in its outcome, is set up as a standard Romantic quest. Dymer yearns to recapture the ecstasy of that embrace, though that feeling is itself characteristically scaled down when he comes to regret having wasted "for a kiss / Time when they could have talked!" This access of nostalgia sounds as if he would cheerfully exchange passion for a bluff conversation in tutorial or pub. The girl perhaps did well to have eluded him: she might have ended up among the Inklings, with results which (as Lewis's future wife discovered) were not altogether satisfactory.

The sexual allegory in *Dymer* is troubled and self-exposing, with a heavy-footedness surprising in an author who produced some of the finest critical thinking ever devoted to allegories of love. Both the political and the sexual themes are bound up with an allegory of father-son relations, equally self-exposing, which Lewis expounded with a schematizing doggedness. Dymer, the crypto-parricide whose slaying of his professor liberated him from political tyranny, finds himself the unwitting father of a revolution as totalitarian as the state it defied. His sexual union turns out to have fathered the monstrous specter who, at the end of the poem, slays *him*, in a reversal of the story of Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum*, in which the father unknowingly slays the son, and which had an immense impact on Lewis in his early teens. But in *Dymer* the final parricide is itself reversed as Dymer's monster son is transfigured into a paternal deity:

... towering large against the skies,
A wing'd and sworded shape, whose foam-like
hair
Lay white about its shoulders ...

This "whole/Pure body brimmed with life," and a great universal rebirth follows:

He heard clear trumpets blowing and bells
ring,
A noise of great good coming into earth
And such a music as the dumb would sing
If Balder had led back the blameless spring
With victory ...

The final stanza's mention of Balder (the slain son of Odin in Norse mythology, and the subject of another Arnoldian epyllion, *Balder Dead*), like the epigraph from the Nordic *Hávamál* at the beginning, shows how strongly Lewis's mind was employed among non-Christian examples of slain sons. If Lewis himself spoke of "redemption by parricide," a phrase to which Wilson attaches a considerable importance and which provides the title of one of his most important chapters, Dymer figures in the poem predominantly as the young hero, and the final imagery shows his filial slayer in the converted guise of a divine father. The redemptive slaying comes over almost leeringly as a paganizing variant of the Christian myth whose central feature is the immolation of the Son. If these things allegorize Lewis's hostility to his father, on Wilson's model, they even more strikingly project a pattern of filial "suffering rather than inflicting."

There seems no doubt that *Dymer* was an important part of the run-up to Lewis's conversion to Christianity, and that he himself came to see it that way. In the ten years of experimenting with the story he was unceasingly preoccupied with pagan versions of the slaying of young heroes or gods, some but not all of which involve paternal punishers: Sohrab, Balder, Hippolytus (perhaps), Adonis. An early version of *Dymer*, entitled "The Redemption of Ask" (1918), was, as he told Greeves at the time, "written in the metre of Venus & Adonis," though in his later account of the poem's chronology Lewis said it was in "Lucretian metre": Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece* was, like the final *Dymer*, in rhyme-royal, but it's interesting that the young Lewis should have had his mind on Shakespeare's other poem,

whether there really was a version in the six-line stanza of *Venus and Adonis*, or whether he misremembered that poem as being in rhyme-royal. The wholesale syncretism of the poem's mythological associations, blending Arnold's Persian and Nordic stories with those of Greco-Roman antiquity and of the New Testament, seems academic in its schematic comprehensiveness, like an exercise in comparative religion, as Lewis seems to have sensed. After his conversion, and under the influence of Hugo Dyson and Tolkien, he saw this as showing a prefigurative and perverse readiness to be moved by any version but the Christian one: "the idea of the dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) . . . moved me provided I met it anywhere *except* in the Gospels." By that time, he saw in the pagan versions not only evidence of the enduring centrality of the "sacrificial idea . . . which runs . . . thro' Balder & Dionysus & Adonis and the Graal too," but quite specifically "the first shadowy approach of something whose reality came with Christ." He now believes that "the story of Christ is simply a true myth . . . working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*." What he earlier felt in the "Pagan stories" was the power of the myth without knowing its meaning "in cold prose": the presence at the end of the poem of an iconography and a vocabulary which are Miltonic and Christianizing shows that he had already been prepared to let it surface in bad hot verse. The pre-conversion poem carried within it an emotional charge that would soon be released in the major spiritual event of his life, and one which was deeply and inseparably linked with sexual and parental obsessions.

Wilson shrewdly focuses on the fact that, just before his conversion, Lewis read the *Hippolytus*. His account of this in *Surprised by Joy* is extraordinarily brief: "I was suddenly impelled to re-read (which was certainly no business of mine at the moment) the *Hippolytus* of Euripides. In one chorus all that world's end imagery which I had rejected . . . rose before me . . . I was

overwhelmed." Lewis does not here mention that the *Hippolytus* is a play in which a father has his son slain from a misplaced sexual jealousy, a fact which, as Wilson puts it, "Lewis somehow expects all readers of his memoirs to remember" and which Freudian resistance-theorists may want to say that Lewis repressed. There is in fact some evidence of reticence and of awkward feelings about the play, and about Euripides in general, in whom he tended to stress the romantically appealing rather than the more obviously disturbing aspects. Later in *Surprised by Joy* he reverts to the image of "the Western Garden, or what not," that he had identified with Euripides, among others, in the 1950 Preface to *Dymmer*. Much earlier, in 1918, while working on the "Venus & Adonis" version of *Dymmer*, he was recommending to Greeves Gilbert Murray's translations, adding "I have never more than glanced at them, not being fond of Euripides myself," though a few weeks later he was reading the *Alcestis*. Soon after that he was attending Murray's lectures on the *Bacchae*, finding them "a real inspiration," and a little later declaring his dissatisfaction with Murray's version of the play ("I think I shall write one myself one day"). He found it a "wierd [*sic*] play," but "great poetry," and was predictably fascinated by the fate of Pentheus, another case of divinely engineered filial sacrifice, though the unwitting parental destroyer is a mother. The dream-vision of the primal lust in *Dymmer* may derive partly from the maenadic frenzies in that play.

At the time of the reading of the *Hippolytus*, Lewis's father was himself dying, and Wilson notes the insistence in *Surprised by Joy* "that his father's last illness and death 'does not really come into the story I am telling.'" In the darkly hinted passage on his omission of the Mrs. Moore story Lewis similarly said "I doubt if it has much to do with the subject of the book." Wilson calls the *Hippolytus* "a play in which the priggish young hide their emotions while their elders give themselves up to extremes of passion," adding that "it is probably fanciful to cast

Mrs. Moore as Phaedra, or the P'daytabird [a nickname for his father] as Theseus." Readers will recognize this as a characteristic feint, insinuating at least part of what is being deprecated, and used to similar effect in Wilson's later summation of the two stages of Lewis's conversion (the second of which included a vow of chastity):

The first change, the move to theism, happened in 1929 and coincided more or less directly with the death of his father. It would be far too glib to suggest that he consciously made the second change, to adopt Christianity, merely to give himself an excuse to abandon sexual relations with Mrs. Moore . . .

If this seems not only like eating your Freudian cake and having it too, but doing both while pretending to be off cakes altogether, the practice is probably appropriate to the case. The truth-content of Freudian models often works in proportion as the literal proposition is discounted, as Wilson's cunning "merely" discounts the untenable while leaving the rest more or less in play. It is the shipshape allegory that kills, in such contexts, and incomplete suggestion, loose ends, and contradiction become enabling conditions, not disabling flaws. You might say that if he lacks the courage of his Freudian convictions, he is right to do so, because the Freudian models are never wholly right and seldom wholly wrong. Wilson is at all events able to show that Lewis was himself obsessed "by the possibility that his life could be interpreted in a purely Freudian way." He was later afraid that his theological writings could be "explained" by hostile readers "in terms of the Oedipus complex (or perhaps the Hippolytus complex)," to the effect "that he was only able to find peace for his heart by coming to terms with a Heavenly Father of his own projection when he had seen the last of his earthly father in Belfast." Such fears tend to be self-fulfilling, not because of the backlash to "resistance" or because "negation" implies assent, but because they entail a predisposition to structure one's

thought and behavior within the terms and images established by the system. The truth is that Lewis was in his own way as conscious of Freud as Auden ever was. This is especially true of *Dymer*, a poem whose invitations to Freudian decoding are numerous and willful, and which was written, as Lewis says in the 1950 Preface, when "the new psychology was just beginning to make itself felt in the circles I most frequented at Oxford." He tells in *Surprised by Joy* of how psychoanalysis influenced the modes of thought of himself and his friends, even though "we did not swallow it whole (few people then did)." *Dymer* is his longest and most personal poem, an avowed allegory of his own life which occupied him for ten years, and in which he invested the most important ambition of his writing career, and the later Preface's remark that "every one may allegorize it or psychoanalyse it as he pleases" is more defensive than dismissive.

Freud was certainly included in Lewis's sweeping and crotchety anti-modernism, though as late as 1954, when all the faddish enthusiasms were behind him, he could say that "the work of Jung and Freud, and the practice of many modern poets and prose writers, has [*sic*] taught us . . . that symbols are the natural speech of the soul, a language older and more universal than words." Anyone who knew Lewis at the time this was written will remember the triumphalist ribaldry with which he slapped down the merest intrusion of a Freudian concept in conversation or a student's essay. This was usually done through outrageous feats of reductive analogy of the corkscrew-and-cathedral type, by comparison with which the remark in *Surprised by Joy* that "You might as well offer a mutton chop to a man who is dying of thirst as offer sexual pleasure to the desire I am speaking of" seems a model of fastidious discrimination. Lewis was also capable of saying that his attitude to psychoanalysis was colored by "a partly pathological hostility to what is fashionable," and that he was "not prepared to defend" some of his language on the subject. This was in 1940.

A similar blend of loud derision and partial acquiescence, often self-implicating, may in fact be encountered at most periods of Lewis's career. He was a prey to neurotic anxiety all his life, as were many of those close to him. He was not only preoccupied that he might be "interpreted in a . . . Freudian way," as Wilson says, but more or less consciously uneasy, like many anti-Freudians, that the whole thing might *actually* apply to him. As early as 1923, when a brother of Minto's was under psychiatric care, he wrote to Greeves, "Arthur, whatever you do never allow yourself to get a neurosis." The language is exactly that of his genially jeering admonitions thirty years later to *angst*-ridden undergraduate pupils. If it sounds like a slightly updated product of the exercise-and-cold-bath school of psychiatry, the letter to Greeves in fact continues: "You and I are both qualified for [neurosis], because we both were afraid of our fathers as children." It is written in the very serious context of a grave, indeed fatal, mental illness (the patient's brain, though this was not known at the time, had been damaged by syphilis).

The psychiatrist who solemnly informed Lewis "that every neurotic case went back to the childish fear of the father" cannot have known how raw a nerve he was probing. Lewis was then about halfway through the completion of *Dymer*, and his father was alive. My sense of the poem, unlike Wilson's, is that Lewis's theme of "redemption by parricide," which he feared "would seem simply preposterous and shocking," is offset by self-implicating fantasies of filial martyrdom (whether punitive or self-justifying, self-pitying or self-exalting is not clear), which may be an even stronger reason for embarrassment. But the two issues are not really separable, and the subject was a fraught one either way.

But as the psychiatrist's account of neurosis moves into the mode of advice, whether Lewis's own or the doctor's, there is no mistaking the earnestness of Lewis's mood: "Keep clear of introspection, of brooding . . . Keep to work and sanity and

open air." This seems a swerve from Freud to a homegrown psychotherapy, and perhaps even back to the cold-bath-and-fresh-air school. But what we are really witnessing here is a truer Lewis note, which is that of Johnsonian anguish. The message is of practical palliatives (not cures), introspectively arrived at and ceaselessly invoked, and it comes over not with facile heartiness but with the stricken gravity which, in Johnson, was the product of continuous wrestling with disabling melancholia and depression; and Lewis, as I said, sometimes modeled himself on Johnson. The view that Johnson's introspective psychology anticipated Freud has sometimes been put forward, and this may be part of the story, though I doubt if Lewis saw it that way.

Freud, and in a different way Auden, seem to have been focal points for Lewis's ambivalent encounters with the "modern." But the story of his mixed and unruly feelings about modernism in a more technical literary sense has even more to do with two of its greatest poets, Yeats and Eliot. Lewis knew both men slightly, and put Yeats into *Dymer* as the Magician who seeks to seduce the hero to the "false promise" of the "wish-fulfillment dream." The Preface speaks of Lewis's early attachment to Yeats's belief in the occult, of Yeats's place in his pre-conversion intellectual development, "along with Voltaire, Lucretius, and Joseph McCabe," of his recoil from the "spirits," which became "inflamed into a violent antipathy," of his two visits to Yeats in Broad Street, Oxford, in 1921, which are vividly written up in a letter to Greeves in June of that year. The portrait of the Magician in Canto VI is based on those visits, and combines what is (for the poem) an unusual descriptive authority with some not wholly unconvincing pastiche:

It was a mighty man whose beardless face
Beneath grey hair shone out so large and mild
It made a sort of moonlight in the place.
A dreamy desperation, wistful-wild,
Showed in his glance and gait: yet like a child,

An Asian emperor's only child, was he
With his grave looks and bright solemnity.

And over him there hung the witching air,
The wilful courtesy, of the days of old,
The graces wherein idleness grows fair;
And somewhat in his sauntering walk he rolled
And toyed about his waist with seals of gold,
Or stood to ponder often in mid-stride,
Tilting his heavy head upon one side.

Commenting on this in 1950 Lewis said that "If he were now alive I would ask his pardon with shame for having repaid his hospitality by such a freedom. It was not done in malice, and the likeness is not, I think, in itself, uncomplimentary." There follows what must be Lewis's most generously intelligent tribute to a modernist master:

Since his great name here comes before us, let me take the opportunity of saluting his genius: a genius so potent that, having first revived and transmuted that romantic tradition which he found almost on its death-bed (and invented a new kind of blank verse in the process), he could then go on to weather one of the bitterest literary revolutions we have known, embark on a second career, and, as it were with one hand, play most of the moderns off the field at their own game. If there is, as may be thought, a pride verging on insolence in his later work, such pride has never come so near to being excusable.

This was written four years before "The Confession," an attack on modern poets whose best-known and silliest lines are probably:

For twenty years I've stared my level best
To see if evening—any evening—would
suggest
A patient etherized upon a table.

Eliot embodied with special force for Lewis the bogey of modernism, in both poetry and criticism. He did not, like Yeats, have saving connections with faery and romance and his verse-forms seemed a more radical assault on

traditional prosody than Yeats's "new kind of blank verse." Even so, Lewis's brother records that on the occasion when he read Eliot to the Inklings and found it "bilge" the reading itself had been done "superbly."

Lewis was endlessly captious and childishly ill-tempered about Eliot, whether as poet, critic, or man of God, though one sees the point of his impatience with Eliot's faddish "neo-scholasticism." His knock-down "refutations" of Eliot are a characteristic and sometimes disfiguring element in some of his best critical writings (the *Preface to 'Paradise Lost'* and the brilliant attack on Dryden in "Dryden, Shelley, and Mr. Eliot"). The bullying reductionism and inelasticity of these set pieces will be recognized by those who knew him, and those whom he taught, as equivocal strengths in his conversation, playful as well as wilful and sometimes perverse: a "talking for victory," Johnsonian in character, frequently espousing for the occasion points of view one knew him not to support in "real life," and often redeemed by a warm geniality. In cold print, and on certain subjects, they sometimes became nagging and crotchety, their force of utterance or strenuous "cleverness" in excess of the mere point made.

Lewis's personal encounters with Eliot were choppy. Wilson describes a meeting between the two engineered by Charles Williams in 1945, with Eliot saying, "Mr. Lewis, you are a much older man than you appear in photographs," and going on, in a compliment which may, as Wilson thinks, be merely backhanded, but which may also be read as the tribute of a gallant adversary: "I consider your *Preface to 'Paradise Lost'* your best book." When Lewis's *A Grief Observed* was pseudonymously submitted to Faber & Faber, Eliot, then managing director of the firm, found the book distasteful and other readers disliked it, but the decision was made to publish when the real author became known (the pseudonym N. W. Clerk was used, N. W. being one of Lewis's pseudonyms as a poet, standing for Nat Whilk, "I don't know who"). By now, late in life, Lewis

and Eliot were on terms of cordiality. They had both been appointed in 1959 to the Commission to Revise the Psalter. In a letter of May 1962, Lewis responds to Eliot's sympathies about his health, urges him to write an essay on "Punishment," and declines an overture to criticize the New English Bible because he doesn't know enough about New Testament Greek (adding the rueful comment "Odd, the way the less the Bible is read, the more it is translated"). He even came to pay a tribute to Eliot's greatness, less publicly and with less particularized vividness than that to Yeats, a short time before he died, when he wrote to the Master and Fellows of Magdalene College, Cambridge, accepting his election to an Honorary Fellowship:

If I loved you all less I should think much of being thus placed ("so were I equall'd with them in renown") beside Kipling and Eliot. But

the closer and more domestic bond with Magdalene makes that side of it seem unimportant.

Wilson does not go into the relationship with Eliot as much as he might. But his summary of the similarities that lay beneath the differences and the antagonisms is forcefully suggestive:

It could be said that there were areas of similarity in these two men temperamentally so very different. Both came to England as strangers; both found their way by a circuitous spiritual path to lives patterned by the restraints of the Anglican confessional and the consolations of the Anglican altar. Both were men with two women in their lives, separated by a long gap of pious, not particularly happy celibacy; both had found soul mates in their second marriages to much younger women.

Raymond Aron, philosopher of liberal democracy

by David Gress

The French political philosopher Raymond Aron, who died, at the age of seventy-eight, in October 1983, is perhaps best known to American readers as the author of a crushing indictment of Western Marxism and philo-Communism, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955), and of a skeptical, questioning, yet sympathetic view of America's world role, *The Imperial Republic* (1973).¹ In fact, though Aron made many other significant contributions—in sociology, in strategy and international relations, in the history of ideas, in judgments on public policy, and in philosophy—to the culture and the spirit of democracy in the twentieth century, these two books well illustrate the range of his interests, sympathies, and learning.

Aron wrote *The Opium of the Intellectuals* from 1951 to 1954 as a refuge from personal tragedies, and in order to come to grips with and attack the belief, held by most French intellectuals of the time, that the Soviet Union, for all its possible faults, truly represented "the party of humanity," that political consciousness had to be progressive, and that to be progressive was to support the Soviet Union and to criticize or oppose the United States. In writing it, he

drew on his philosophical learning, his political knowledge, and his experiences as a journalist and commentator in postwar France. He wrote the other work, *The Imperial Republic*, some twenty years later in an effort to explain the character and methods of American foreign policy and international behavior to an audience that, in France, was at best critical of, and at worst overtly hostile to, the United States. He began the book in response to Henry Kissinger's proclamation of 1973 as the "Year of Europe" and ended it in the shadow of the Yom Kippur War, the OPEC oil embargo, the collapse of the dollar, Watergate, and American defeat in Vietnam. Conceived as a description of a certain state of affairs, a pattern of world politics dominated by America, it became in fact a history of a completed epoch, namely of the American hegemony that had both come and gone within Aron's own lifetime. Where *Opium* drew on philosophy and journalism in about equal measure, *The Imperial Republic* drew on the significant skills that Aron cultivated in the second half of his public life as theorist of international relations, sociologist of power, political economist, and diplomatic historian. What links the two books, and indeed all of Aron's vast and varied oeuvre, is his passionate concern for the conditions and perils of freedom in the modern world, combined with a grasp of the profound movements, the secular shifts in world politics. Such a grasp can either be

¹ Both *L'Opium des intellectuels* and *La République impériale* are in print from Calmann-Lévy, Paris. The U.S. edition of *Opium* (Doubleday, 1957) is out of print; a reprint of *The Imperial Republic* (Prentice-Hall, 1974) is available from the University Press of America.

ideological, with the purpose of domination and power, as in Marxism, or be philosophical, in which case its purpose is understanding. Aron's grasp was of this latter kind. Like his great model, Tocqueville, Raymond Aron sought to understand the world, not in order to change it—world-changers, he found, invariably caused more harm than good—but in order to determine the conditions under which civilized human life, and democratic politics, might be possible.

Aron, in other words, defended the idea of limited, contingent—but genuine—freedom in the real world, and did not demand the limitless, perfect freedom of utopia as proclaimed by revolutionary Marxism. He did not have to wait for experience to know that the promise of limitless freedom must inevitably take the form of the most complete and thorough tyranny known to man. For him, this lesson did not grow out of political practice, but was a necessary consequence of human nature as manifested in history. Human nature is fallible and imperfect; we do not and cannot know what we would have to know in order to create the perfect society; therefore, the Marxist project of perfection must founder on the reefs of passion, recalcitrance, and the natural human interests that are simply unamenable to constant and total mobilization in the name of utopia. For revolutionary Marxists, however, those interests are evil and irrational, and must be crushed, since nothing can be allowed to impede perfection. Hence the Gulag, the terror, the sixty million dead, and the hundreds of millions of crushed, exploited, and ruined lives that are Marxism-Leninism's legacy to mankind.

The philosophy of history was the beginning and end of Aron's reflective life, as he described it in his *Memoirs*, one of his two last major works.² At first glance, the book may appear rather dry and humorless, little more than a series of summaries of the author's works, interspersed with accounts of his opinions and intellectual encounters. I recall discussing it with Alain Besançon,

the Soviet scholar who inherited Aron's column in *L'Express*, a few weeks after Aron's death; I knew Besançon to be a fervent admirer of Aron, yet he dismissed the *Memoirs* as stilted and disappointing, offering little that is new, and certainly less rewarding than any of Aron's other works. He contrasted the tedium of the book with the vitality and spirit of the man himself. In his noteworthy tribute to his late teacher and friend, he wrote that "we all loved Aron physically, I can attest it, and found him very beautiful," confessing also that "I am ill placed to judge Aron's work, which I read to inform myself not so much about the world but rather about a personality that I loved, and in order to hear the distant echo of a voice that gave me pleasure." Further on in the same piece, Besançon made the observation, surprising to many, that Aron, despite his conservative politics, his classical literary tastes, his impeccable appearance, and his perfect manners, was "at bottom a rebel, like so many young men of his generation, and remained so in the full sense, albeit discreetly. There was never a more rebellious generation than that of the 1930s . . . All of them did not remain surrealists, all of them did not remain on the extreme Left or the extreme Right, but, as civilized rebels, they kept a space for practical jokes and mockery, obstinately rejecting excessive seriousness."

Another unforgettable feature of the man himself was his eloquence. This, according to Besançon, "was of two kinds: ordinary and extraordinary. The ordinary kind was wholly admirable. The words flowed smoothly,

2 *Memoirs: Fifty Years of Political Reflection*, by Raymond Aron; translated from the French by George Holloch, with a foreword by Henry A. Kissinger; Holmes & Meier, 310 pages, \$45. This is an abridgment of the French original, *Mémoires*, published in Paris, by Editions Julliard, in 1983. In this essay, I have in some cases used my own translation of this work, especially since Mr. Holloch's translation, though fluid, is often a paraphrase. Admittedly, French eloquence, particularly Aron's subtle variety, escapes translation.

vigorously, without hesitation. If they were recorded, one could print them as they were, with no change. But when circumstances required it, Aron's eloquence took a leap into the realm of the absolute . . . There was no pathos in this eloquence, but something dry, bare, profoundly personal, noble, elevated, chastely modest . . . related, in some ways, to the parliamentary eloquence of the English Revolution, of the former, that of the Puritans, and of the latter, that of the Whigs, by its restrained sarcasm, its bitter irony, its Tacitean concision, its overwhelming politeness.³

Rereading the *Memoirs* after some years, I had to revise any earlier less-than-positive judgment. The formerly tedious accounts of Aron's works became exciting itineraries. The meetings, discussions, encounters were anything but dry and bloodless; on the contrary, each of them yielded its part of the twentieth-century drama of will and aspiration, hope and defeat. Nor is it true that the book is impersonal; Aron does not conceal the terrible tragedies of his life, the death of his second child or the mental handicap of the youngest, but mentions them precisely where they are necessary for the account to make sense, and with a habitual modesty that is all the more overwhelming in its effect. More typical are the many places where Aron gives us his ruthlessly honest opinion of himself as a student, a journalist, or a candidate for professor at the Sorbonne in 1955. Perhaps most interesting of all are his reflections on his own lack of faith, his life as a secular Jew in modern France, and his own surprise at his strong emotional reaction to the Israeli victory in the Six Day War of 1967 and to Charles de Gaulle's indictment of Jews as "a self-confident and domineering people."⁴

3 These quotes are taken from Alain Besançon's contribution to *Raymond Aron 1905-1983: Histoire et politique*, a memorial issue of the journal *Commentaire* (no. 28-29, 1985) consisting of reprinted and previously unpublished pieces by and about Aron.

4 Aron's writings on Judaism are collected in *Essais sur la condition juive contemporaine* (de Fallois, 1989).

Indeed, this is no dusty account of lost debates and unimportant meetings, but a vibrant and indispensable chronicle of a vital part of our century.

In his other late important work, *Les dernières années du siècle* (1984), Aron undertook an assessment of world politics in the two decades since his masterpiece *Peace and War* (1962) and a preview of the "last years of the century," an essay in applied philosophy of history that concluded by reiterating his famous statement of 1947 on superpower relations in the era of nuclear weapons and intercontinental rivalry: "Peace impossible; war unlikely."⁵ On one level, Aron, in *Les dernières années*, offered brilliant strategic and diplomatic history as well as some remarkable predictions, for example of the economic crisis of the Soviet empire, the growing role of the Soviet military, and the rapid decline of American influence in Europe.⁶ On another level, he defined and illuminated the real choices facing democratic peoples by his skeptical philosophy that rejected both the pacifists' intemperate fear of the future and the apocalyptic strategies of the nuclear warriors.

In rejecting both excessive moralism and false realism, Aron was applying the very philosophy of history that he had long ago distilled in his earliest work and was completing an arc of thought, a journey from theory to philosophical understanding of the political world, that he had begun in the

5 *Les dernières années* was published by Julliard in 1984.

Paix et guerre entre les nations was reprinted with a new introduction, Aron's last writing, by Calmann-Lévy in 1984. The U.S. edition of *Peace and War* (Doubleday, 1966) is out of print.

6 I am not convinced, by the way, that Aron chose wrongly in making the growing influence, or rather prestige, of the Soviet Union the central theme of the work. Who, after all, is the most respected politician in the world today? Who was *Time* magazine's "Man of the Decade"? Not Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, or any of the heroic Central European democrats, but Mikhail Gorbachev, the embattled ruler of the Soviet Union.

1930s. Back then, as a young *normalien* (graduate of the elite Ecole Normale Supérieure), Aron sought to establish historical reason and historical consciousness as a valid mode of knowledge “opposed both to scientific rationalism and to positivism.”⁷ By scientific rationalism, the young Aron meant above all the ambition of Emile Durkheim, the father of modern sociology, to “found the morality of educators on the new science,” that is, the science of society. Durkheim, in other words, believed that one could derive the “ought” of morality from the “is” of society, that society itself, properly studied, would yield the moral rules that should guide educators, who in turn would guide society. By positivism, Aron meant the illusion of historians, particularly of the Victorian and post-Victorian eras, that they could, by appropriate methods, discover “truth in the naïve sense of reproducing the reality of the past *wie es geschehen ist* (as it has taken place), according to the celebrated expression of Leopold von Ranke.” Against both these beliefs, Aron asserted the role of experience in changing the interpretation of the past and declared, in a phrase that more than any other summed up his deepest conviction: “Philosophy develops in the ever-renewed movement from life to consciousness, from consciousness to free thought and from thinking to willing.” This was not relativism, a philosophy of anything goes; it was rather a skeptical humanism, a hope of freedom limited by the awareness of danger and disaster, an awareness more than confirmed by the events of the 1930s.

Since both the scientism of Durkheim and the positivism of the Rankeans dominated French academic life at the time, it was no wonder that Aron’s conclusions made him an outsider. He himself ironically described his early works as “desperate or satanic,” desperate because they promised no certainty, satanic because they appeared to

make a mockery of the firmly held faith of Durkheim’s moral educators, the academic intellectuals of the Third Republic. Even more ironically, or perhaps inevitably, as he widened his interests after 1945 to include strategy, world politics, and political economy—and as he applied those interests in public debate as journalist and columnist from 1946 and as professor of sociology at the Sorbonne from 1955 to 1968 and from 1970 at the Collège de France—his skeptical humanism aroused the much more virulent ire of the Marxist academic and political intellectuals of the Fourth and Fifth Republics, who exercised in full and arrogant measure Durkheim’s mandate to be the educators of society in matters of political morality.

Not all of Aron’s enemies were on the Left. During the war years, which he spent in exile in England, Aron had frequent, if not close, contact with Charles de Gaulle’s Free French government. In 1945-46 he served briefly as *chef de cabinet* (principal private secretary) to de Gaulle’s minister of information, André Malraux—the only official position Aron ever held, unless one counts his academic appointments. In 1946, de Gaulle’s first government fell. In 1947, Aron joined the Gaullist party, the RPF (*Rassemblement du peuple français*), because he considered the General the only credible alternative to the fragmentation of the Fourth Republic and its weakness vis-à-vis Soviet expansionism. In 1953, de Gaulle withdrew from politics, temporarily as it turned out, and the RPF effectively came to an end. Aron cut his ties to Gaullism, which he came to view as more of an obstacle to than an agent of Western unity. This earned him the anger and contempt of many on the Right, for whom parochial French interests often implied anti-Americanism. Aron could not, in the circumstances of European division and Soviet power, conceive of a French national interest that could possibly override loyalty to the Western alliance.

Still, Aron’s bitterest enemies were on the Left, the most famous undoubtedly being

7 *Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire*, Aron’s most important work of philosophy, was published by Gallimard in 1938, and reissued in 1986.

Jean-Paul Sartre. Even after Sartre lost his cultural hegemony in the 1970s, a common Parisian saying had it that, on the character and purposes of the Soviet Union, or on the question of political morality in general, it was “better to be wrong with Sartre than right with Aron” (*mieux vaut avoir tort avec Sartre qu’avoir raison avec Aron*). Sartre, according to the common legend, was the brilliant polemicist, the philosopher of the absurd and of human defiance of oppression, the prophet of liberation, in short, the defender of truth and freedom. Aron, by contrast, was the plodding academic, supinely accepting the world as it was, the apologist for capitalist exploitation and American imperialism, the enemy of global popular liberation, the man of war. This attitude died hard, even in its milder version.

In 1977, Aron published *In Defense of Decadent Europe*, his most Tocquevillian work, a searching and accurate diagnosis of the paradoxical weakness of Western democracies and their elites, fascinated and mystified by Marxism, ignorant of the true virtues of liberal democracy, forgetful of the meaning and the reasons of liberty.⁸ Presciently, in view of the events in Central Europe in 1989, Aron noted “in the face of ideocratic [Eastern] Europe, liberal Europe represents not merely liberty, but productive efficiency, and embodies less imperfectly than the other the values invoked by all Europeans, from the Atlantic to the Urals. That the Europeans of the West should be convinced of this, and that they should not seek salvation where they, in turn, will find only servitude, those are the two purposes of this essay in advocacy.” Despite the relative neglect of this late work by many critics, it is perhaps Aron’s strongest political writing, displaying his absolute mastery of the political history of ideas (in this case, of Marxism as ideology and practice), his command of economic and political facts, and his rhetoric with its

double effect that I have already noted in regard to his *Memoirs*—slow on the first reading, irresistibly powerful on the second. The reviewer for *Le Nouvel Observateur*, at the time still very much the journal of record of the *bien-pensant* Left, looked in vain for the revolutionary prescription he apparently considered obligatory in any work of social analysis. Annoyed by its absence, he concluded his review with the petulant statement that “Aron evidently accepts the world as it is.” In other words, the problem with Aron was that he was a good sociologist who did not prostitute his scholarship to ideology. The reviewer entirely missed one of Aron’s fundamental points, which was that the doctrine of revolutionary liberation had been responsible for vastly greater evils than any Western democracy.

Aron, Sartre, and Paul-Yves Nizan (who later became perhaps the most gifted writer ever to surrender his spirit to Communism) were classmates at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*. Aron graduated in 1928, Sartre a year later because, the first time round, he had shown his contempt for the system by not preparing himself for the examinations. “Aside from his ease in writing, the richness of his imagination and capacity for construction in the world of ideas dazzled me (and dazzles me still),” Aron wrote after Sartre’s death, commenting also that Sartre, who never was a member of the Communist Party, had fewer doubts about himself and his righteousness than Nizan, the committed militant. “What attracted us about Paul-Yves was the mystery of his personality. He had been tempted by the *Action française*, by Georges Valois’ blueshirts, before finding his anchorage in Communism.”

Sartre and Aron remained in touch, even on terms of friendship, until 1948. Given Sartre’s monstrous personality, this span of time betokens a forbearance on Aron’s part that must seem extraordinary until one realizes how typical it was of the man. He firmly believed that Sartre was a more brilliant writer, a more skillful polemicist, a more imaginative and original thinker than himself. Therefore, he owed it to the very

8 *Plaidoyer pour l’Europe décadente* was published by Laffont, Paris, in 1977. The U.S. edition, published in 1979, is available from Regnery Gateway.

principles of reason and intelligence to seek out Sartre from time to time and to pay respects to his brilliance until doing so became incompatible with his sense of dignity. The break came after a radio broadcast in which Sartre and a friend had, in considerable (and even physical) detail, compared de Gaulle to Hitler. The Gaullists organized a counterbroadcast, to which they invited Aron, and in which they attacked and insulted Sartre, who was also present. "I remained silent, since I could neither agree with Sartre nor join the imprecations against him. I learned some weeks later that Sartre could not forgive my 'silence,' while he was alone, surrounded by enemies." The fact was that Sartre, ever ready to dish out insults by the hundreds among friends, to an isolated microphone, or in writing, was afraid of personal confrontations, of having to own up to his invective in the presence of those affected. Even knowing this, Aron could not omit the second reflection that was so characteristic of him: "Of course, I might have found a way to act otherwise, to make clear my friendship for him without agreeing with his broadcast." Or the third: "But Sartre was right. The friendship was dying by itself."

Following this episode, Sartre began to attack Aron publicly, calling him a "cynic without even the virtue of intelligence" and accusing him of "fatalistically accepting" the prospect of a third world war. In fact, the year before, in 1947, Aron had published his *Le Grand schisme*, his first major exercise in grand strategy and world political analysis, and in that book he had declared precisely the opposite of what Sartre claimed, since he found "peace impossible" but "war unlikely." Sartre, however, could never be bothered to read, much less try to understand, the writings of people he considered inferior, a category that included, by definition, all those who disagreed with him.

Aron provided an important key to both their personalities when, in 1980, he reported a conversation he had had with Sartre sometime around 1929. Sartre said to him, "Why are you interested in politics if you

don't believe in revolution, if you consent to this society even while admitting its evils (*turpitudes*)?" Recalling these words, Aron commented: "I was probably influenced by an image often invoked by [the philosopher] Alain: civilization is a thin membrane which a shock can easily tear open, and barbarism will surge through the rift. Revolution, like war, risks tearing open the membrane of civilization, which has slowly grown over the centuries."

In 1976, when Aron's skeptical humanism and sober liberalism were just beginning to achieve the recognition they deserved, the budding "new philosopher" Bernard-Henri Lévy interviewed Aron on the subject of Sartre. "Which of you will have put a greater mark on his time?" asked Lévy. Aron found the question (and the questioner) foolish, but replied civilly that there was no contest: Sartre was the richer intellect even in his excesses. Aron himself, he asserted, was "too tied to reality" to produce works that would outlast the generations. "I present myself as an analyst or a critic. Writers of this type may exercise considerable influence on their contemporaries, but since their work is tied to an ephemeral situation, it will sink into oblivion faster than that of those creators who, at the risk of error, build cathedrals out of concepts with the courage of imagination." For Sartre, of course, the very notion of "error" was a hopelessly bourgeois category. What mattered was to be for freedom, no matter how many real corpses and how much actual unfreedom it entailed. Aron went on: "What I think is catastrophic, what he will one day be blamed for, is to have used his dialectical virtuosity and his generous impulses to justify the unjustifiable. To have, if you will, deployed his treasure of genius to try to show that one could not be against Stalin and that it was necessary at least to be close to him. Whereas, on the contrary, one will perhaps be able to say, if there is any future interest in him or me, that I have never justified the unjustifiable for any dialectical reason."

Aron saw Sartre once again, in 1979, when André Glucksmann, a follower of

Sartre who had become a leading spokesman for the so-called “new philosophy,” contrived a meeting between the two at a rally to raise money for the Vietnamese boat people. Aron, recovered from a serious heart attack of two years earlier and dapper as always in his neat gray suit, rose to greet the doddering Sartre, who was clearly quite ill and possibly no longer fully aware of his surroundings. He used the old *normalien* greeting, “little comrade” (*petit camarade*), and was later at pains to explain that it contained no ideological subtext and was no more and no less than it seemed. By that time, Aron’s final vindication was well under way.

In 1989, a State Department official, Francis Fukuyama, published an article entitled “The End of History” in *The National Interest*, which earned considerable notoriety for its author. The theme of the article was that Western liberal democracy and its associated ideas and practices had won the decisive battle. No radically different political ideology or system of thought was likely to arise to challenge liberal democracy in the way that revolutionary Marxism had challenged it in the century after 1880. The world would still witness conflicts, perhaps even major ones, but the ideological and institutional issue was fundamentally settled, and mankind could look forward to an endless era of technocratic management.

Had Fukuyama not said so himself (with little fear of being checked out), it is likely that very few of his readers would have known where he lifted the notion of an “end of history.” In fact it came from Alexandre Kojève, a White Russian émigré who, in the 1930s, developed the thesis of an end of history in a series of famous lectures on Hegel (attended by Sartre and Jacques Lacan, among others) at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. Aron considered Kojève one of the three greatest intellects he had personally known, the two others being Sartre and the philosopher Eric Weil. These three were “superior spirits whom I admired

and against whom I would not dare to measure myself.” Kojève’s notion was that history potentially came to an end as soon as the possibility of a universal, homogeneous, world-encompassing political order emerged, which is to say in the epoch of Hegel and Napoleon. “History stops when man no longer acts in the strong sense of the word, that is to say, when he no longer negates, no longer transforms what is given by nature and society by means of a bloody struggle and a creative effort.” The need for such struggle and effort disappeared as soon as Hegel explained everything; the form of the universal empire to come, however, would be that of Stalin’s Soviet Union, or so Kojève maintained in public. No matter that “red Russia was governed by brutes, its language even vulgarized, its culture degraded.” These were mere details, evident to any imbecile, and of no significance whatever in determining the shape or the timing of the end of history. Aron wondered whether he was entirely serious: after World War II, Kojève, the prophet of global Stalinism, became a loyal civil servant in the ministry of economics and a strong defender of French national interests in the Common Market. “I wanted to see how history played out,” he explained to Aron, who, astoundingly, considered him “even more intelligent than Sartre Believing that he had assimilated all of philosophy and history as embraced by Hegel’s system, he followed the ideas and events of our time with the detachment of the sage and the also with the close attention of the great civil servant.”

Undoubtedly there was some playfulness in the idea of the end of history. In the revised edition of his lectures on Hegel, Kojève added a footnote saying that, upon reflection, he might admit that Japanese culture and economics could provide a new form of life, of “human struggle with nature and society,” that might indeed postpone the end of history and succeed universal Stalinism. Aron noted that the real reason for this sudden interest in Japan was a journey and a love affair. Mr. Fukuyama, of course, is of Japanese descent.

I have mentioned that, toward the end of his life, Aron finally achieved a measure of recognition by the very groups and interests that had rejected him so furiously in the past: the academic, political, and media intellectuals, the moralists of postmodern society. As might be expected, he had little sympathy for most of the radical agenda of 1968, for the vulgar Marxism, the hysterical denunciations of liberal democracy, the boundless faith in utopian solutions and in the benevolence of Third World tyrants. All of these traits merely recapitulated, in cruder and louder form, the political moralism that Aron had always rejected. Common to them was what Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut called “anti-humanism,” the belief that there were no humane values in politics or morality, that humanism was a sham and had never been anything more than a cover for exploitation and imperialism. By the later 1970s, this ideology was cracking open along the seams of its own contradictions. Into the resulting vacuum came a new, anti-Communist humanism, inspired at first by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose *Gulag Archipelago* was translated into French in 1971-74. Why, however, did anti-Communism spread beyond the Right in the 1970s when it had notoriously failed to do so in the 1930s or 1950s? One reason was that a number of Soviet and East European dissidents had settled in Paris and were slowly gaining sympathizers among the intellectuals. These people, who patently were not American stooges or capitalist oppressors, restored an older language of political morality that Aron had never forgotten, but which was unknown to most of his contemporaries. Another reason was that political passions in general declined after the departure of de Gaulle and the advent of a new generation of more pragmatic, centrist politicians. The socialist party under François Mitterrand, in particular, stopped appearing ridiculous, stopped acting defensively, as if socialists had to apologize for not being totalitarian. And finally, there was Aron himself, whose decades of teaching, writing, and journalism were finally having an effect.

Those decades, from his return from exile in 1944 to his final years at the Collège de France, were busy. From 1947 to 1977, he wrote a weekly column for *Le Figaro*. When Robert Hersant, the publishing magnate, took over the paper, Aron switched to *L'Express*, which remained his journalistic outlet for the rest of his life. *Peace and War*, which first appeared in 1962, was Aron's summa on international relations, a theoretical, sociological, and historical analysis of the phenomenon of war, of the ideological, economic, and political divisions of the post-1945 world, and of the morale and strategy necessary to the West for survival short of war. As always, Aron presented no firm conclusions, believing any such to be inherently contradicted by the variety of events and perspectives. Instead, he posed questions: Would mankind remain divided, between East and West, rich and poor, or would it become one? If it became one, would it be in the manner prescribed by Immanuel Kant, in a global society of peaceful republics, or in the manner of Kojève, in some universal empire? Neither paralyzing fear of the future nor utopian aspirations were attitudes worthy of man, Aron observed, clearly echoing Tocqueville: “Let us instead try not to fall short of either the one or the other of the obligations imposed on every one of us: neither trying to escape from our warlike history, nor betraying the ideal; let us think and act with the firm purpose that the absence of war shall continue to the day that peace becomes possible—if indeed it ever does.”

In the spring of 1977, Aron suffered a severe heart attack, and ever after regarded his recovery as a reprieve and his remaining years as an unexpected gift. Had he died in 1977, he would not have written his *Memoirs*, but above all he would not have experienced “the years of public recognition, when France finally consented to recognize the immense benefits she owed to him,” as Alain Besançon wrote. The breakthrough came in 1981, when two journalists, Dominique Wolton and Jean-Louis Missika

(both, as Aron genially noted, Trotskyite revolutionaries), asked permission to spend two weeks taping conversations with Aron for television, conversations which were subsequently published as *The Committed Observer*.⁹ Aron took evident pleasure in the talks, which led to a genuine friendship across generations and ideologies, “in a style forgotten for half a century.” His interviewers began by asking him about his political positions and philosophy, clearly puzzled and amazed by a man who had never felt the need nor the urge to “give in to any of the intellectual fashions of Paris.” The broadcasts and the book were acclaimed by all apart from the straight Communist Party press. Even Michel Contat, ally of Sartre and editor of his collected works, proclaimed that “the leftist intelligentsia, whose counterpart and despised adversary he has been for so long, discovers now that it is Aronian, or almost.” Still, Contat had to try to find some way to explain the phenomenon: “The Left remains his family, because it is with the Left that he argues, in an attempt to open its eyes.” Nor could Contat avoid a few unfair jabs, feeble compared to those of Sartre in his heyday: “How can his geopolitical vision of what is to be preferred or despised justify Aron’s apparent blindness . . . on North-South issues, on the Holocaust of hunger?” Aron’s comment on this piece of idiocy was to the point: “Would I have helped the starving in Bangladesh or the Sahel in any way if, in the manner of Contat’s master, I had blamed it all on rich Americans?”

As one might expect, Aron’s popularity did not in the least turn him into a *monstre sacré* like Sartre. He continued his skeptical itinerary to the end, on the one hand doubting the ability of men in general and Europeans in particular to take proper thought for their own political survival, and on the other hand refusing to succumb to apocalyptic fears, which he regarded as mere

metaphysical luxury. While the outside world was slowly preparing to recognize him, he completed, in 1975, his last great philosophical work, *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War*, in which he addressed, once more, the fundamental themes of his strategic and philosophical reflection: the nature of war, limited or absolute; the notion of war as the continuation of policy by other means; the idea of national mobilization and “people’s war” in modern European history; and, finally, the uses and interpretations of Clausewitz in the twentieth century.¹⁰ *Clausewitz* is perhaps the least appreciated of Aron’s major works, though it is his greatest and most perfect attempt at a political history of ideas, a genre hardly cultivated in American historiography but one that, in my opinion, offers the single greatest promise of intellectual renewal in the humanities. Aron himself regarded the labor as somewhat quixotic, since it was directed primarily at a German, rather than a French, audience, and a rather specialized one at that, particularly in the atmosphere of East-West détente of the mid-1970s. Yet the question, for example, of total mobilization versus limited war is one of vital importance for the future of democratic nations, whose leaders must be able to answer the question, How do we defend ourselves and deter violence in a world in which the absolute threat, of nuclear attack, will probably never be executed, while bandits and terrorists seize and kill our citizens with impunity? Terrorists, moreover, whose national leaders themselves draw on another legacy of Clausewitz, the moralistic legacy of war as “people’s war” or “war of liberation,” of which he was the first and most profound analyst.

Raymond Aron died suddenly, with no preceding illness, in the afternoon of October 17, 1983. He had just come from the law

9 *Le Spectateur engagé* was published by Julliard in 1981. The U.S. edition, published in 1983, is available from Regnery Gateway.

10 *Penser la guerre: Clausewitz* (Volume I, *L’Âge européen*; Volume II, *L’Âge planétaire*) was published by Gallimard in 1976. An abbreviated U.S. edition, *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War*, was published by Prentice-Hall in 1985.

courts in the Palais de Justice, where he had testified on behalf of his friend, the sociologist Bertrand de Jouvenel (known for his writings on power). An Israeli historian had written a book in which he accused Jouvenel of sympathy for the Vichy regime and even for National Socialism. Jouvenel brought suit for libel and asked Aron, among others, to testify to his behavior during World War II. Having given his deposition, Aron was leaving the building when he collapsed, unconscious, in the street and died on the way to the hospital.

Had he not been so inveterately critical of himself, he would have been able to acknowledge more fully the scope and magnitude of his own achievement. In the postscript to his *Memoirs*, he stated that of all his books, *Opium, Peace and War*, and *Clausewitz* are those in which he found the fewest faults. The majority of thinkers listed in our histories of political thought would have been proud to have written any one of those three works. In these works, Aron explained and refuted not merely the philo-Sovietism of French intellectuals in the 1950s, but any liberalism that does not take itself seriously, that has not the courage of its convictions. What could be more relevant in the 1990s, when an American president proclaims kindness and gentleness as national purpose and flounders helplessly in the face of what might otherwise seem the greatest opportunity for American action in the name of liberal democracy since 1945, namely the collapse of Communist power in Central Europe? Together they constitute a complete philosophy of the modern age, providing anyone who reads them properly with a suit of intellectual armor complete and sufficient to repel and rise above the meaningless chatter of the day.

Some might say that, were Aron alive today, he would, at last, shed his pessimism about the capacity of liberal democracies to take thought for their own future. This is doubtful. He was a man of passion and, when appropriate, of emotion, and would

have rejoiced at the revival of Central Europe, yet he also knew, as Kojève or at least his epigones apparently do not, that history has no end, and that permanent stability or success are the lot only of those gods he did not believe in, and not of mortal men. Moreover, the Central Europeans owe little to the Western liberal democracies, whose leaders and spokesmen too often in the past belittled their aspirations and consorted with their oppressors. In the face of such blemished history, let Aron's final verdict stand:

Precisely because their historic mission seems completed, the Europeans have doubts about their fate and wonder which way to turn The more the means of production and destruction multiply, the more the means of communication, calculation and intelligence at the disposal of humanity surpass all fictions From all sides, prophets beset us . . . those who are obsessed by nuclear arms, those terrified by pollution, or those whose are kept awake by the population explosion, all prophesy the apocalypse I need neither Nietzsche nor Heidegger to know that the development of humanity does not obey reason . . .

Does the fate of Western Europe depend more on the disappearance of the gods or on the decline of the birthrate? I still have enough taste for philosophical speculation not to give a categorical answer to these questions.

On the other hand, if we are talking about possible apocalypses, the threats hanging over mankind, I know where to look for faith and hope. Against the evils of industrial civilization, nuclear weapons, pollution, hunger, or overpopulation, I have no secret miraculous remedies. But I know that millenarian beliefs or theoretical ratiocinations will serve no purpose; I prefer experience, knowledge, and modesty.

If civilizations, all ambitious and all precarious, are to realize in a distant future the dreams of the prophets, what universal vocation could unite them other than Reason?

“Matisse in Morocco”

by Karen Wilkin

About five years ago, I was in London while a curious exhibition called “The Orientalists” was on at the Royal Academy. There were a few rather fine Delacroixs at the start, and then room upon room of veiled women, fierce warriors, picturesque streetscapes, and naughty glimpses—certainly imaginary—into the seraglio. Except for the Delacroixs and a very few others, the pictures were florid, highly polished, and loaded with oddly unconvincing detail. Most of the show was pretty second-rate and since almost nothing had much to do with the North Africa that I knew, it wasn’t even enjoyable at the level of the travel poster. But in the last room, everything changed: three miraculous landscapes by Matisse seemed effortlessly to distill the light, the colors, even the smells of North Africa.

Yet, especially in the context of the exhibition, the Matisse landscapes were surprising. There was none of the self-conscious exoticism of the work in the preceding rooms. Give or take a palm or two, the conception wasn’t wildly different from Matisse’s paintings of Collioure, in the south of France. The main emphasis was not on subject but on *painting*, yet the three landscapes were undeniably suffused with the atmosphere of a particular place. The luminous rose and blue-violet of *Les Acanthes* (1912, Moderna Museet, Stockholm) perfectly evoked Moroccan twilight without the painting’s being in any way literal, while the transparent viridian green and ocher, the

schematic tree trunks and explosive “fan” of *La Palme* (1912, National Gallery of Art, Washington) suggested the dazzling sun and shade of a Moroccan garden at midday, without failing to honor Cézanne or to celebrate the act of putting paint on canvas.

These three landscapes, in an otherwise fairly unmemorable show, were perhaps the chief things I knew about Matisse’s connection with North Africa. There was that old favorite at the Museum of Modern Art, *Les Marocains* (1915-16), and the reclining figure in the Cone Collection in Baltimore, subtitled *Souvenir de Biskra* (1907), which implied that the artist had some familiarity with the region. And wasn’t there a seated male figure in Arab dress in the Barnes Collection—or was that a studio setup? I didn’t think much about it. I simply assumed that like so many artists and writers of the first quarter of this century—Paul Klee, Albert Marquet, James Wilson Morrice, Pierre Loti, Pierre Benoit, André Gide, and all the rest of them—Matisse had made the obligatory visit. He was, after all, an avid traveler. The three landscapes were superb, particularly when seen together, since each varied and enriched the ideas proposed by the others, and that was really enough.

All of which is a roundabout way of saying that I was enormously excited about the prospect of an exhibition called “Matisse in Morocco”—with good reason, as it turns out. The show, which opened in March at the National Gallery of Art in Washington,

D.C., is even more exhilarating than I had hoped. "Matisse in Morocco" is a tribute to scrupulous research, generous cooperation, and faith in the power of the visual. Like Matisse's best work, the exhibition is both cerebral and sensuous; it addresses the intellect and the emotions with equal intensity.¹

It's a relatively small and tightly focused show, since the period under examination is brief. Matisse spent a total of about six months in Morocco, primarily in Tangier, in 1912 and 1913, with an interruption of about five months back in France at mid-point. As he often did when traveling, he drew extensively in Morocco, but, in contrast to his usual practice, he also worked on major paintings during his sojourn, even carting some of them back to Tangier after his return visit to France in order to work on them again, on the spot. The show assembles virtually all of the paintings from the Moroccan period and a large selection of drawings, some never before exhibited, some newly identified as Moroccan. (One of the two missing paintings, in the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad, is too fragile to travel, while the other—that seated figure in Arab dress—is absent because the Barnes Collection refuses to lend to any exhibition.) The three landscapes are now in their proper context, among spectacular figures in Moroccan costume, several other outdoor scenes, and a number of powerful still lifes.

Seeing the landscapes together at the Royal Academy was enlightening. Seeing almost all the Moroccan paintings as a coherent group is a revelation. Not only is it possible to follow the dialogue between pictures that Matisse conceived as pairs or

groups, in response to one another, but it is also possible to see how he disciplined, altered, and abstracted his acute perceptions of actuality when we compare intense on-the-spot views of Tangier with fully developed, distanced large-scale canvases. Most of the works in the show are little known to Americans since about half of them are in Russian collections and have been since Matisse exhibited his Moroccan pictures at Bernheim-Jeune, in Paris, in 1913. We have glasnost to thank for the chance to see them together once again.

The French critic Pierre Schneider—who, with the National Gallery's Jack Cowart, is the show's co-curator—first proposed the exhibition about ten years ago, in part because of the Moroccan pictures' long separation from each other, in part because he considers the innovations and discoveries of the series to have been crucial to the total development of Matisse's art. The six months in Tangier generated work that at once summed up Matisse's earlier preoccupations and pointed to what was to come. Schneider considers that brief period so important to an understanding of Matisse's achievement that he titled his wide-ranging catalogue essay "The Moroccan Hinge."²

Matisse was a mature artist when he went to Morocco at the end of January 1912. The Fauvist pictures, with their isolated color-patches, were behind him, as were the so-called decorative pictures, with their rosy silhouetted figures and schematic blue and green settings. New issues of elaboration and simplification, of pattern and unbroken color expanse, of tension between spatial illusion and flatness now engaged him. At forty-two, he was exhibiting quite regularly and although his saturated color and pared-down drawing were still regarded as

1 "Matisse in Morocco: The Paintings and Drawings, 1912-13" was on view at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., from March 18 through June 3, 1990. It will be shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from June 24 through September 4, 1990; at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, from September 28 through November 20, 1990; and at the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad, from December 15, 1990, through February 15, 1991.

2 *Matisse in Morocco: The Paintings and Drawings, 1912-13* contains, in addition to Mr. Schneider's essay, contributions by Jack Cowart, John Elderfield, Albert Kostenevich, and Laura Coyle (National Gallery of Art / Abrams, 304 pages, \$39.95; \$22.50 paper).

outrageous by the uninitiated, he had also acquired a group of loyal supporters—most, it should be pointed out, not among his fellow countrymen. Americans, notably Gertrude and Leo Stein and their compatriots the Cone sisters, were among the first to respond to the clarity, logic, and daring of Matisse's paintings. By the time of his Moroccan trip, two extraordinary Russian collectors, Ivan Morozov and Sergei Shchukin, had become Matisse's principal patrons. (Both Morozov and Shchukin bespoke Moroccan pictures before the artist left France.)

Islamic art and artifacts attracted Matisse long before he decided to paint in Tangier. He had traveled to Munich to see an exhibition of Persian miniatures, and to Córdoba and Seville to see something of Islamic Spain. He had even been in North Africa before, briefly in Algeria—hence the title *Souvenir de Biskra*. In Russia, visiting his enthusiastic patrons, Matisse is said to have been interested in icons, hardly the products of Islam, but formally not unrelated. The oriental rugs and Islamic textiles that Matisse collected appeared in his paintings early on, but especially after about 1909 he seems to have become increasingly fascinated by perceptual ambiguities, composing still lifes with vases of flowers set against flowered wallpapers, floral fabrics, exuberantly patterned rugs, and mirrors, playing the "real" against the schematized, the abstracted, and the reflected. Often these paintings were constructed with compartmentalized zones of arabesque pattern, the way a Persian miniature is. Sometimes Matisse included flattened, silhouetted figures, locked into dense fields of rug, wallpaper, tile, and fabric patterns. Schneider makes much of the admittedly wonderful picture *La Famille du peintre* (1911, Hermitage Museum, Leningrad), claiming that in it the artist "attempts to integrate into a patterned ground a category of objects that Islamic art had cautiously barred from its compositions: the human figure." This shortly after elaboration on Matisse's interest in Persian painting. Hasn't Schneider ever looked at

any miniatures, with their agile horsemen, elegant and sinuous women, turbanned warriors?

In fairness to Schneider, his point is that Matisse used oriental motifs not because of their exoticism but because of a profound sympathy with their fundamental character. This Schneider calls Matisse's "orientality," his ability to reinvent the randomness and spatial complexity of his surroundings as suggestive two-dimensional pattern. Throughout Matisse's career, the paintings of interiors bear out Schneider's argument. The relentless *decoratedness* of the French bourgeois room—which Matisse's contemporary Vuillard exploited as an end in itself—becomes in Matisse's hands an equivalent for the oriental garden, with its geometric beds and paths, its erotically lush vegetation; suffocating interiors are made to evoke the out-of-doors. Schneider, to bolster his argument, discusses *The Red Studio* (1911, Museum of Modern Art, New York), with its unbroken expanse of a single, warm color punctuated by small units of complex color and drawing, as an image of the world completely translated into the language of the carpet.

Quite possibly, it was Matisse's "orientality," his taste for Islamic art and his understanding of its formal qualities, that prompted him to go to Morocco in the first place. Rather than seeking exotic subject matter, Matisse may simply have wished to see, firsthand, the living culture that produced objects that interested him. His earlier trip to Algeria had apparently not been much of a success, but Morocco may have seemed a more desirable objective. It had recently come under French influence, making it a relatively safe and easy place to visit, and there was the testimony of those who had preceded him—Delacroix's Moroccan sketchbooks, with their penetrating watercolor studies, and Pierre Loti's rapturous book *Au Maroc* (1889), which Matisse certainly knew. The final impetus may have come from his friend Marquet, who had painted in Morocco the previous

year. Marquet could vouch for one of the most important of Morocco's attractions: brilliant, constant light. Like his avowed master, Cézanne, Matisse preferred to work uninterruptedly from his chosen motif, without variations in illumination.

Matisse's arrival in Morocco, however, was marked by torrential rains—not surprisingly, since winter is the wet season in North Africa, as elsewhere in the Mediterranean. The artist and his wife were forced to stay close to their hotel, so the first of Matisse's Moroccan pictures was probably a still life of an overscaled vase of irises set against a looming hotel-room dresser, in rather somber hues. It's a densely painted picture, quite different in palette and rather different in touch than any of the other Moroccan paintings, but it is already composed as they are, with blocks of color locked together by alternately curvilinear or geometric profiles, with a scattering of floral pattern. The picture, *Le Vase d'iris* (1912, Hermitage Museum, Leningrad), with its tight, furniture-filled space and its suggestion of air only in the mirror's reflection, coincidentally confirms how much Matisse and his friend Bonnard must have had to say to each other.

The weather finally improved, the extraordinary Moroccan spring advanced, and Matisse settled down to work. The drawings that begin the exhibition, views out the window of his hotel and studies of the Moroccans he persuaded to pose for him, also document his wanderings through Tangier. We can follow Matisse around a little *place* near the Casbah, the citadel above the old city. A small Arab house with a flower-laden trellis catches his eye, a sheltered terrace, an arched wooden door; he shifts his viewpoint a little, focuses on a new element in the scene, moves on, recording everything with a few spare lines, so that the white of the paper becomes an equivalent for the clear, detail-blurring light of the region. In still other drawings Matisse was engrossed by the arabesque edges of roof tiles, the tile patterns of Sunnite minarets, the nail-studded doors of houses, all

translated into the same economical, essential line drawing.

A delightful self-portrait affirms that Matisse saw himself as an observer, a detached outsider. He presents himself in correct coat and tie, a little portly and very dignified in his beard, glasses, and hat. He perches on a folding stool, drawing a *marabout*, the domed tomb of a holy man. Two women, wrapped in *sifsaris* that leave only their eyes visible, look on, their oval forms like elongated versions of the dome of the *marabout*. Even the cobbled pavement underfoot, rendered with rapid arching strokes, shares the same fluid rhythm as the women and the architecture, all quite different from the angular figure of the artist folded up on his stool, clutching his rectangular paintbox. Yet Matisse entered Arab cafés, according to at least one drawing, where patrons and musicians are disposed above and below the built-in benches in a fashion that seems to have as much to do with the large decoration, *Music*, that Matisse painted for Shchukin in 1909 as with any local phenomena.

Matisse's Russian patrons had requested landscapes, among other things, and he apparently struggled to fulfill the commission. But landscape per se, even the startlingly lush North African landscape of early spring, carpeted with flowers like a *mille-fleurs* tapestry, did not attract him. Disciplined nature, in the form of the gardens of the Villa Brooks, did. So did masses of cut flowers or bowls of oranges, tamed, removed from their natural setting and brought into his hotel room. The "landscapes" he eventually consigned to Morosov were, in fact, not landscapes at all. *Paysage vu d'une fenêtre* (1912-13, Pushkin Museum, Moscow) is primarily an image of the man-made environment: the Anglican church and the citadel as seen from Matisse's hotel-room window, their crisp geometry played against rounded vases of flowers set on the windowsill. Trees and countryside are subsumed by the enveloping expanse of blue that dominates the picture, the row of cypresses beside the church reduced to

slender fingers extending from the surrounding mass of color, a palm hinted at by a spiky shadow.

The even more remarkable right-hand wing of the triptych composed of *Paysage vu d'une fenêtre* and two other superb pictures is even less landscape-like. *Porte de la Casbah* (1912-13, Pushkin Museum, Moscow) is all architecture and street, a severe but seductive arrangement of colored planes that pulses between flat *paintedness* and a potent evocation of the deep, shadowy space of the gateway, with its horseshoe arch and distant view beyond. The blooming trellis of the drawings is suggested, beyond the gateway, with a few spots of pink on a green slash, above delicate cross-hatching. Light pours through the gate—a brushy pink wedge held by strict vertical blue masses—and becomes the real subject of the picture, nature in its most intangible and ephemeral aspect.

The central panel of the triptych, *Sur la terrasse* (1912-13, Pushkin Museum, Moscow), is nominally about a seated female figure, Matisse's favorite Moroccan model, Zorah, in a patterned gown, seated between her slippers and a bowl of goldfish, but this panel, too, is a more powerful evocation of light itself than of what is revealed by light. The figure dissolves into a dapple of arabesque motifs that emerge only momentarily from the radiant field of light bluish-green that all but fills the picture. Zorah is in shadow, but in a luminous, light-filled shadow that presses forward, enveloping the kneeling girl. The intimate space of this center panel opposes the distant view from the window, to the left, and the more confined view through the Casbah gate on the right, the shifting viewpoints reinforcing the sense of being dazzled, unbalanced, stirred.

Models were apparently difficult for Matisse to find, especially female models, given orthodox Islam's iconoclasm and strict separation of men and women. Eventually, however, he arranged for a number of sitters—a groom, a Riffian "warrior," a mulatto woman, and the young woman who appears in several sensitive drawings and a

group of paintings, including *Sur la terrasse*, Zorah. (She is variously described in the catalogue and text panels of the exhibition as "a young Arab woman," as being under the protection of her brother, as Jewish, and as the inmate of a bordello. Clarification, please.) In the most striking of the figure paintings, Matisse reduced his models to sinuous, thinly painted shapes against equally simplified grounds. Schneider maintains that Matisse painted each figure like an overscaled flower, insisting on what he calls "florealty" as much as "orientality" as characteristic of these pictures. As evidence, he points to the lack of specific portraiture in the faces, the absence of psychological penetration.

All the major Moroccan figure paintings, the tall, narrow full portraits and the square, half-length seated and standing figures, are iconic and hieratic, which perhaps predisposes us to read them as types, rather than as individuals, yet there is considerable individuality among them, despite the economically drawn faces and general simplifications. *Amido* (1912, Hermitage Museum, Leningrad), a portrait of the young groom, is an entrancing arrangement of salmon, ocher, lavender, and pale turquoise that clearly asserts the slenderness and agility of the model. The standing figure in *Le Riffian debout* (1912, Hermitage Museum, Leningrad) is confrontational and broad, the slight turn of his head away from strict frontality implying a surprisingly convincing wary alertness. The conflict between the foursquare solidity of the figure, which almost fills the canvas, and the energetic, almost sketchy paint application fills the portrait with life. Schneider is slightly more convincing when he points out that Matisse seems to have treated the figures as though they were themselves costumes, turning them into blocks of disembodied color stitched together with arabesque drawing, the way the Riffian's *djellabah* is made of large, flat sections of cloth held together with knots of colored embroidery. On the whole, however, MOMA's John Elderfield, in his splendid catalogue essay, has more

relevant and illuminating things to say about *how* these pictures are painted, about differences in their surfaces that tell us a good deal about how Matisse thought about the act of painting and about the relationship of nature and art.

Overall, it's color in the Moroccan paintings that distinguishes them, even within the oeuvre of a master of color. Matisse's Moroccan palette seems oddly specific to the place and, at the same time, wholly abstract. Vibrant blues and chalky blue-greens suggest light-filled shadows as much or perhaps more than they do sky or sea or the colors of tilework or even the ubiquitous blue and green doors and window frames of North Africa, painted in colors that are supposed to ward off both the evil eye and flies with equal efficiency. Similarly, Matisse's rose-pinks and salmons call up sunlight, or, simply, brightness, rather than any particular objects of those hues. They may simply be Matisse's response to all that blueness, a legacy of his Fauvist practice of color opposition. It all looks very spontaneous and direct, but often, in the Moroccan pictures, at least in the "worked" paintings as opposed to the washy ones, pulsing hues are the result of unexpected overpainting—rosy red escaping from under apparently pure ultramarine to produce an extraordinary blue-violet, and so on.

A version of the Moroccan palette persists even after Matisse returned to France in mid-February 1913, as does the remarkably direct paint application, the transparency of means that makes you feel as though Matisse were permitting you to witness the history of the painting's evolution. Habits of structure endure, as well. The Museum of Modern Art's *Blue Window*, painted in France in the summer of 1913, rings changes on ideas proposed in *Paysage vu d'une fenêtre*, while the scraped, layered 1914 *Vue de Notre Dame*, in the same collection, is like *Porte de la Casbah* turned inside out, the solids of the Moroccan picture turned into space, the distant view through the gateway changed into the hovering, distant cathedral. In both paintings, the blues, ochers, and roses of the

Moroccan canvases are cooled down a little, chilled by the northernness of their subjects, but their relation to the Moroccan pictures seems clear.

Although Matisse never went back to Morocco—he planned a return trip in November 1913, but changed his mind—Moroccan motifs persist in his work. The exhibition concludes with *Les Marocains*, painted in 1915-16 as a sort of memorial to the North African sojourn, perhaps as an escape from the reality of World War I. Familiar images are transformed by distance. The *marabout*, the melon patch, a few figures are isolated, suspended in a sea of paint; tender, bleached pinks stand paradoxically for the blue-tinged whitewash of coastal North African towns, while enveloping black stands just as paradoxically for blinding light. *Les Marocains* is a muscular, vigorous image of North Africa transformed by memory. The odalisques, the harem costumes, the coffeepots and little Arab tabourets that haunt Matisse's easel paintings during the Twenties and Thirties make Morocco into theater by transforming fragments of a living culture into studio props, absorbing them into that middle-class French interior once again. Only Matisse's astonishing visual intelligence lifts these commonplace subjects out of banality. Less literally, the large *papiers coupés* of his last years assert Matisse's "orientality" in abstract terms.

But, as John Elderfield points out, simply identifying these obvious survivals is oversimplification. The true legacy of the Moroccan period is more complex and more subtle. It manifests itself in the facture of later pictures and in the tension between abstraction and figuration that is one of the great mysteries of Matisse's art. In the Moroccan pictures, Matisse succeeded in rendering particular qualities of place, of light, and of artifact in terms of "pure" painting, while still attaching them to relatively specific images, contradictory as that may sound. For the rest of his life, Matisse would continue to test his acute perceptions of actuality against his equally acute sense of painting as a non-illusionistic

arrangement of colored planes. *Seeing* itself was Matisse's subject, not what was seen; the Moroccan pictures help to make this clear.

"Matisse in Morocco" is accompanied by a handsome catalogue with reproductions of all the Moroccan paintings in color, except for the Barnes Collection's *Le Rifian assis*, which appears in black and white in accordance with yet another Barnes Foundation rule. The drawings are also copiously illustrated. Even with the most sophisticated of modern technology, Matisse's thin, intense color is beyond the capacity of printed illustration, so the catalogue suffers from the usual problems of inaccuracy and distortions; it's no worse than most, however. There's a useful chronology, good entries and documentation for each picture, appendices with Matisse's letters to his patrons, and much more. The curators of the exhibition have each contributed an essay: Pierre Schneider's is rather overblown and

slightly fantastic; Jack Cowart's meticulous piece on Matisse's Moroccan drawings is an exercise in stating the obvious, given the catalogue's abundant, good-quality reproductions of the drawings themselves. Albert Kostenevich's article on Matisse and his Russian collectors was to be expected, since the show will travel to Leningrad and Moscow; it's a workmanlike piece, but offers little real information. John Elderfield's essay, on the other hand, is sufficient reason to buy the catalogue; it is a model of intelligence and insight that explores the subtle interplay in Matisse's paintings between content, image, and materiality.

Only one question. In the National Gallery's installation, one entered "Matisse in Morocco" through an arcade and a mass of potted plants evidently intended to evoke a North African garden. Why, since they went to all that trouble, was the arcade Gothic, rather than Moroccan? Horseshoe arches can't be that hard to build.

The beatification of Walter Benjamin

by Richard Vine

Beatification: . . . *the process of determining the sanctity of a person who has died and declaring him to be among the blessed in heaven; he is then entitled to public worship and usually, but not necessarily, canonized.*

—Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) seems a singularly unprepossessing candidate for critical apotheosis. Professionally, the would-be philosopher was a failure. Personally, his life was ruled, if not by duplicity, then by abulia—a nearly pathological lack of decisiveness and resolve. At the dawn of World War II, still unable to master the world outside himself, he ended as its self-selected victim, killing himself at the age of forty-eight out of accumulated self-pity.

Born to a prosperous art dealer and antiquarian living in the Grunewald district of Berlin, Benjamin suffered a pampered childhood, in which he was subjected to such occasional traumas as seeing a poor person on the street, being grouped together higgledy-piggledy with other children at school, and having to take long shopping strolls with his mother. "My habit of seeming slower, more maladroit, more stupid than I am, had its origin in such walks," he later remarked, "and has the great attendant danger of making me think myself quicker, more dexterous, and shrewder than I am." As an adult, he would claim that he "came into the world under the sign of Saturn—

the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays." In "A Berlin Chronicle," the forty-year-old Benjamin, lamenting an exceptionally poor sense of direction even in late adolescence, admits that "it was thirty years before the distinction between left and right had become visceral to me, and before I had acquired the art of reading a street map"—and magnanimously blames his mother for "my inability even today to make a cup of coffee." Benjamin's younger sister Dora (who would later help support him in Paris) and younger brother Georg (a dedicated Communist doctor in the workers' quarters of Berlin) seem not to have shared their brother's affliction.

As a boy, Benjamin received private tutoring at home before attending Berlin's progressive Kaiser Friedrich School. At thirteen, he was sent to the elite Friedrich-Wilhelm Gymnasium in Thuringia, where he fell under the influence of Gustav Wyneken, a leading figure of the German Youth Movement. This organization, begun in 1901 as a hiking society, had quickly burgeoned into an idealistic protest movement dedicated to Nature and Tradition and adamantly opposed to the "corruptions" of modern civilization. Put off by some of the Movement's proto-Nazi elements (cultish heroism and emphasis on Germanic purity), Wyneken had founded his own subgroup open to less primitivistic aesthetics and more attractive to the incipiently leftist, assimilated Jewish Benjamin. The Free School

Community in Wickersdorf, with its advocacy of individual, self-directed education and the pedagogic value of Socratic Eros, accorded well with Benjamin's early belief in redemption through philosophic, if not physical, solitude—the private, communion-like merger of Self with Idea. Benjamin became a proselytizer for Wyneken, involving himself in discussion groups at the University of Freiburg and elsewhere, writing for and helping to produce his magazine *Der Anfang* (The Beginning), and, eventually, in May 1914, becoming president of the Berlin chapter of the Free Students League, a wing of the Youth Movement opposed to more conservative blood-and-soil-oriented fraternities.

At the beginning of World War I, Benjamin, along with many of his Movement friends, volunteered for active military service. Later, however, when faced with actual induction, he went without sleep, overdosed on coffee, and—shaking and blanched—managed to secure a medical exemption. In early 1915, seeking to dissociate himself from anything even remotely military, Benjamin sent Wyneken a letter abruptly and irrevocably ending their friendship. Thus while the stalwart philosophical companions of his youth died in obscene droves in the trenches, Benjamin spent the war years reading Kant and the German Romantics, collecting books, studying philosophy, and writing about Hölderlin.

Between 1912 and 1917, Benjamin studied at the universities of Freiburg, Berlin, and Munich, though without sitting for examination in any of them. In 1917, he married the newly divorced Dora Pollak (previously Kellner) and moved on to the University of Bern. In the summer of 1919, the Swiss institution accepted his thesis, "The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism," and granted him a D. Phil. (lower doctorate) *summa cum laude*. Benjamin delayed informing his parents of this fact, for fear that they would terminate his financial support. In the event, they did not, though they did require Benjamin,

Dora, and their infant son, Stefan, to return to the Berlin household where expenses would be lower.

In time, with Dora working, Benjamin began halfhearted pursuit of the Habilitation, a higher and much more demanding doctoral degree which gave its unsalaried holders the right to offer university lectures and thus begin a standard academic career. In 1925, however, Franz Schultz, his sponsor at the University of Frankfurt, persuaded Benjamin to withdraw his degree application after his dissertation (later a book), "The Origin of German Tragedy," had in effect been rejected first by the Department of Germanic Studies and then by the Department of the Philosophy of Art, its readers remarking candidly afterwards that they simply could not understand a word of it. The only likely alternative route into academe was closed to Benjamin when his article "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*" was published (after several rejections elsewhere) by the Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal in a 1924 issue of his *Neue Deutsche Beiträge*. The piece gained Benjamin some admiring notice, but completely alienated the influential circle around Stefan George by polemically savaging an earlier Goethe study by one of George's disciples, Friedrich Gundolf.

Now in his early thirties, Benjamin had little choice but to continue relying on family stipends to supplement the little he could earn for his critical and philosophical writing. His translation of Baudelaire appeared in 1923. In 1926, he was appointed to review books for the new journal *Die Literarische Welt*, as well as for *Querschnitt* and the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. A number of other literary projects followed, including a translation of Proust, various recondite essays, broadcast works, and the aphoristic *One Way Street*. Such was to be the nature—and extent—of Benjamin's gainful employment for the remainder of his life, a life cultivated with considerable leisure in places like Berlin, Munich, Naples, Danzig, Florence, Basel, Riga, Marseilles, Moscow, Ibiza, San Remo, and Paris.

On a 1924 trip to Capri, Benjamin became infatuated with the Latvian actress and theater producer Asja Lacis, a committed Bolshevik who had worked with both Brecht and Piscator. (Benjamin and Dora had been estranged since 1921, when each took lovers; they were divorced in 1930.) Benjamin's Marxism bloomed, and in the winter of 1926-27 he traveled at Asja's instigation to Moscow, hoping to solidify their affair, publish a long study of Goethe in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, and establish a steadily remunerative relationship with the Communist Party. His political acumen at the time is best inferred from his subsequent reflections in the essay "Moscow":

Admittedly, the only real guarantee of a correct understanding is to have chosen your position before you came. In Russia, above all, you can only see if you have already decided. . . . But someone who wishes to decide "on the basis of facts" will find no basis in the facts.

The facts, cruelly incompatible with the "inner truth" Benjamin preferred over objective observation, are that Asja gave him the run-around (remaining true to her own lover, Austrian director and playwright Bernhard Reich), the Goethe article was never published, and no truly advantageous contacts or arrangements were made. Asja Lacis, who did eventually spend some time living and quarreling with Benjamin in Europe, was later incarcerated for ten years (1938-48) in the Stalinist camps.

Throughout this period, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem, who had first met Benjamin as a student in 1913, was urging the critic-at-large to learn Hebrew, move to Palestine (as he himself had done in 1923), and take up university teaching in Jerusalem. For years the vacillating Benjamin effectively led his friend on, once even going so far as to accept Zionist funds for language study preparatory to his never-to-occur emigration. Finally, in 1930, Benjamin wrote, not in Hebrew or German but in French, to inform Scholem that his own style of advanced

intellection necessitated residence in the most culturally refined centers of Europe. He had, moreover, set himself a new goal—"to be considered as the principal critic of German literature."

With the rise of anti-Semitism and Nazi power, Benjamin relocated to Paris, where from 1933 on he lived part of the time with his sister, received money from scattered sources such as his ex-lover Julia (Cohn) Radt, published some German articles pseudonymously, and continued to fill notebooks with his minuscule script. Having met Bertolt Brecht through Asja Lacis in 1928, he visited the playwright often at Brecht's retreat in Denmark, where he was roundly lectured on the necessity of more adamant Marxism and the aesthetic virtues of "crude" thinking. (Brecht kept close at hand a toy donkey bearing the sign, "Even I must understand it.")

For years Benjamin had sought publication and financial support from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, a facility founded in 1923 expressly for the study of Marxism. In 1935, just as his opportunities to publish, even anonymously, in Germany were evaporating, Benjamin was granted an Institute salary as an independent researcher. This was done primarily on the strength of a dutifully completed assignment, the essay "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian," and Benjamin's own proposal for the Arcades Project, a gargantuan socio-philosophic critique of nineteenth-century Paris, whose "overarching concept" was to be "the fetish character of the commodity" as displayed in the city's commercial passageways.

Benjamin labored intermittently on this summa throughout the last fourteen years of his life. Yet when a sample of *The Arcades* was submitted to the Institute in 1938 under the title "The Paris of the Second Empire in the Works of Baudelaire," it was denied publication by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer on the grounds that its materialism was precipitous and unrefined: Benjamin's categories were not those of orthodox Marxism; his thinking was "undialectic" and

“lacking in mediation”; he linked elements in the cultural superstructure “directly perhaps even causally” to correlatives in the productional substructure.

These criticisms should scarcely surprise us, since Benjamin’s firsthand acquaintance with Marx’s work was exceedingly fragmentary at the time. Scholem claimed that until 1933 Benjamin had completely read only one book by Marx, *Class Struggle in France*, and that not until 1928. Susan Sontag places Benjamin’s reading of *Capital* in 1938—fourteen years after he first became a communicant in the Communist cause. If this is so, Benjamin, that paragon of social conscientiousness currently so esteemed for his dictum that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” had himself “chosen his position” about revolutionary Russia without personally scrutinizing either the barbarisms being enacted there or the civilized document containing their principal theoretic rationale.

Benjamin had fewer illusions about the Nazis, though he twice tragically miscalculated their reach. Reluctant to leave the site of his Arcades research, he lingered on in a politically prostrate Paris until, on September 3, 1939, he was ordered along with other German and Austrian nationals to present himself at the Stade le Colombes. There he was held, one of some five thousand, for about two weeks before being transferred to an internment camp in Nevers. During his two-month detention, the forty-seven-year-old Benjamin—overweight, physically debilitated, plagued by a cardiac condition, and quickly exhausted by walking—wisely found a robust man Friday to lug his belongings and tend to his daily practical needs. The critic, meanwhile, ever the academic manqué, occupied himself with conducting a course for the more intellectually capable prisoners in exchange for a few buttons or cigarettes. Soon, noticing that two inmates who had successfully proposed a film project to the French commandant were granted daily passes to town, Benjamin summoned a few literati to his lean-to under

a stairway and announced plans for launching from the camp a new cultural journal of the highest intellectual caliber. This, presumably, was the correct Marxist response to mass imprisonment.

The experience at Nevers and the finally disabusing German-Soviet pact of 1939—coupled with Gestapo confiscation of his Paris apartment, library, and papers—convinced even Benjamin, who considered himself “the last of the Europeans,” that escape to the United States was in order. Horkheimer arranged for his entry visa. Benjamin departed Paris in September of 1940, picked up his U.S. visa in Marseilles, and, supplied also with a Spanish transit permit that would enable him to reach Lisbon, set out with a small group for the French-Spanish border. There, because the Vichy government was denying exit passes to German nationals, it was necessary to walk a well-known but unguarded road in the Pyrenees to Port Bou. On reaching the Spanish town, Benjamin’s group was told by a perhaps sincere, perhaps extortion-minded official that Spain had closed its border to exiles: the band would have to return the next day to France. That night, September 26, Benjamin took a large quantity of morphine and, resisting all aid, died the following morning. His companions were quickly permitted to travel on into Spain, Benjamin was buried anonymously in Port Bou, and the Spanish border restriction was lifted within a few weeks.

This catalogue of fiascos would be beside the point, of course, did it not so eerily reflect the defining mode of Benjamin’s public thought. Facts and ideas overwhelmed his disorganized temperament; his mind was not complex, merely complicated. Yet, like many of his current admirers, Benjamin was able to turn his disabilities to a certain advantage, to exaggerate them into the semblance of a method and the imitation of a style.

Nothing roused the detail-obsessed Benjamin to eloquence like the notion that whole movements of history, entire cultural

and cosmological macrostructures, could be discerned in the smallest material oddity. (His hobbies included rare-book collecting, handwriting analysis, detective fiction, and old toys.) “Dear lady,” he said upon being introduced to Ernst Bloch’s fiancée during a chance encounter on the Kurfürstendamm, “have you ever noticed the sickly appearance of marzipan figures?” To the true believer, this remark is on a conceptual par with Blake’s “to see a world in a grain of sand.” Be that as it may, Benjamin certainly did share with Blake, if not his incisiveness and mythopoeic power, at least his proclivity for harebrained ideas. He once suggested that the written forms of words, regardless of language, physically resemble their referents. One of his countless unrealized projects was to write “a highly significant book on hashish.” His greatest critical ambition—also unfulfilled—was to “author” a volume composed entirely of quotations. And the world, he felt, would surely benefit from a work descriptively analyzing bank notes and currency, since “nowhere more naïvely than in these documents does capitalism display itself in solemn earnest”—as opposed to his own ideal of “a cloudless realm of perfect goods, on which no money falls.”

Benjamin’s principal ambition was to be an *homme de lettres*—which he conceived as a kind of kept man of culture, responsible to nothing beyond himself, least of all to the bourgeois culture that kept him. This privileged unworldliness is nowhere better revealed than in his verbal ontology: “*It is therefore the linguistic being of man to name things.*” The defining human act is interpretation, the correct denomination which instantaneously unites us with the Divine. We are commissioned not to alter and build, but to recognize—to stroll about, highly attuned, through an empire of verbal and physical signs, awaiting deliverance. Benjamin, the inveterate *flâneur*, remains for all his worked-up social consciousness a prophet of passivity. Redemption will come through the instantaneous eruption of truth—first in the sidewalk epiphanies of the

directionless stroller, ultimately in a Messianic arrival, perhaps religious (when Benjamin is talking to Scholem), perhaps Marxist (when he is talking to Adorno or Brecht), which ends and rebuts history. Tellingly, Benjamin’s own metaphor for dialectical materialism was that of a chess-playing puppet secretly manipulated from within by the expert and wizened hunchback “theology.”

This mental atavism is paralleled in Benjamin’s aphorism-as-Messiah mode of writing. His method—often described with unintentional aptness as “dialectics at a standstill”—consists of seizing upon some concrete incidental (that sticky marzipan figure, for example) then juxtaposing it, through a factual-sounding deadpan, with the most grandiose histo-philosophical generality, unsupported by any evidence whatsoever. “The shorter the training period of an industrial worker is,” he tells us in one of a thousand quietly melodramatic “crystallizing” examples, “the longer that of a military man becomes.” Enticed, we wait for the statistical verification that would make this proposition more than a lyrical bluff. We wait in vain. The statement remains empty and portentous, while Benjamin moves on to the next “brilliant” sentence. Benjamin writes—and apparently thinks—only in glittering fragments, making him a quintessential modernist of the minor sort. He is forever mimicking the erudition of a Scholem or Adorno, the magical concision of a Kafka, the social commitment of a Brecht, but never offering the compelling vision that springs from an authentic self.

Such fundamental intellectual deficiency accounts in large part for the forced and meretricious nature of what is undoubtedly Benjamin’s most famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” This article constitutes Benjamin’s explicit attempt to outdo the radicalism of Brecht, whose influence on his work both Scholem and Adorno considered “disastrous.” Indeed, when the piece was submitted to the Institute (by then headquar-

tered in New York and somewhat sensitized to the political climate of its generous refuge), Adorno demanded a toning-down of the Marxist rhetoric through such substitutions as “the constructive forces of humanity” for Benjamin’s original “communism.” An expurgated French translation was subsequently published in 1936 in the Institute’s *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Horkheimer and Benjamin having agreed that its “propaganda value” would be greatest for a French audience. The version known to English readers is translated from a second, somewhat re-radicalized version Benjamin composed shortly afterwards in the vain hope that it would be published in *Das Wort*, then co-edited by Brecht. This German rendition first appeared in a two-volume 1955 collection of Benjamin’s works.

At the center of this endlessly cited essay is Benjamin’s contention that in the modern age aesthetic “aura” has withered away. The work of art, once unique and venerated (i.e., physically and conceptually inaccessible to most viewers), has been radically demystified through the proliferation of multiples, which now barrage and solicit us everywhere without demanding our pilgrimage to one place or one certifiably original object. Thus, according to Benjamin, we can no longer speak meaningfully of a work’s unique history or singular presence, nor can we invoke the tired standards of authenticity and formal authority. The mechanical diffusion of images (primarily through photography and film) has transformed the ontological import of all works of art, forever invalidating such “outmoded concepts” as “creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery.” Happily, this is all to the good, since these solemn anachronisms, in endorsing autonomy and illegitimate grandeur, fostered a criminal authoritarianism, whereas the new principles are “completely useless for the purposes of Fascism,” conducing instead to “the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art.” Works are no longer valued for their functional role within the ritual systems of magic, religion, or art-for-art’s-sake. Such

“cult value” has given way to a thoroughly desanctified “exhibition value.”

These aesthetic changes are part of a much larger social metamorphosis, “the growing proletarianization of modern man and the increasing formation of masses.” Since, in Benjamin’s view, these masses are characterized by their desire “to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly” and their fondness for “overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction” in keeping with their “‘sense of the universal equality of things,’” there is a strong symbiosis implied in “the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, photography, simultaneously with the rise of socialism.” Ideally, these phenomena work together to wrest art out of the distanced realm of “tradition” and thrust it into the immediate arena of “politics.” There the oppositions are simple. The masses naturally strive to eliminate “the property structure,” whereas any attempt to govern them while preserving conventional ownership rights is an exercise in “Fascism”—expressed ultimately in imperialistic war.

For Benjamin, unemployment and a shortage of markets inevitably result from the discrepancy between what the profit system can produce with its new and vastly powerful mechanical means and what its methodically underpaid labor force can efficiently consume. “Only war,” he contends, “makes it possible to mobilize all of today’s technical resources while maintaining the property system.” But to make war acceptable, even desirable, to its participants, the enterprise must be rendered aesthetically compelling. In an ultimate “consummation of *l’art pour l’art*,” the masses, mesmerized by a capitalistic “*Fuehrer cult*,” are taught to glory in the spectacle of their own heroic—and suicidal—combat. Mankind’s self-alienation “has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.” Against this horror, Benjamin poses one pure and resolute counterforce: the enlightened self-interest of the proletariat expressed through socialist revolution.

Fascism aestheticizes politics and war; "communism responds by politicizing art."

Such political sophomorisms, bad as they are, merely furnish the background, the mental climate, for the essay's more elementary factual and logical errors. For "Mechanical Reproduction" is a textbook example of art-historical myopia and circular argumentation. Benjamin is at great pains to show us how and why our experience of art is today fundamentally different from what it was in the premechanical era, without ever demonstrating that it *is* different in any primary sense. He simply accepts—and expects us to accept—on sheer materialist faith that the aesthetic encounter *must* be different nowadays because the means (not even the circumstances, but the means) of its production have changed. This bit of Marxist dogma would likewise imply that the main distinction between *All's Well That Ends Well* and a Neil Simon farce is that one was composed on a typewriter and the other handwritten with a quill. The pseudo-reasoning comes down to this: that new mechanical means of reproduction have made us unprecedentedly intimate with works of art, and familiarity breeds contempt.

Benjamin's sloppy thinking also shows itself in his assumption that what is true for one type of art must be true for the class of "art" as a whole. The basis of this linguistic trick—and conceptual blunder—is the use of one formulation, "the work of art," in both a specific and a general (actually overgeneralized) sense. Consequently, even if Benjamin's points were valid for a given work or a given category of works, they would not necessarily, as he purports, apply to "the work of art" per se.

Consider just what Benjamin means by the term "work of art." Throughout the essay, his key nouns are airily abstract: "art," "Renaissance painting," "certain statues of gods." His examples are restricted to a few chestnuts tucked into the footnotes, sent down, as it were, to protect the theoretic purity of the principal text. He mentions Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Rembrandt's *Anat-*

omy Lesson, Raphael's Sistine Madonna: a handful of works, in other words, which Bernard Berenson might have chosen as touchstones. In no way, obviously, do these one-of-a-kind pieces, executed for high social purposes by the signatory artist's own hand, begin to approximate the range and diversity of actual artistic practice, either present or past. "Aura" is in fact here associated with an extremely limited and inveterately middlebrow aesthetic conception: "real art" as collector originals, Great Masterpieces sequestered away in churches, mansions, and intimidating museums.

Now, a decent appreciation for the masterworks of Western culture may well be a necessary stage in the education of taste, but no one—except Benjamin and his politically motivated followers—pretends that it is the whole of the traditionalist story. This would be yet more evident did Benjamin not choose to slight or ignore the widespread forms of multiple reproduction that prevailed for millennia before the advent of photography. The passing of tribal motifs from generation to generation, for instance, may be regarded as a still unsurpassed means of mass duplication—one which captures the human essence of the enterprise and which later technical processes can only imperfectly imitate. The impulse may also be seen in the ready transfer of one religion's iconography to another, in the copies of Greek originals with which Roman sculptors managed to clutter an empire, in the atelier-produced duplicates and adaptations Renaissance masters used to satisfy demand for exceptionally popular images, in the very concept of "genre painting," and in the abundant availability of prints—"artistic," topical, pornographic, sentimental, religious—centuries before Daguerre put plate to light. Modern photography is, in this sense, merely the continuation of auratic effulgence by other means.

These historic practices confirm the masterwork's ability to betoken something that common viewers have always understood and desired, and that classical thinkers unblushingly labeled "the good." Even in

our own era, Rilke could “hear” in a torso of Apollo the admonition, “You must change your life.” The positing of high and difficult models, the gauging against them of one’s relative accomplishment and worth, the solidarity one thereby experiences with all others who have admired and labored: all this was once well understood, when artists took themselves and their profession (to say nothing of their fellow citizens) with informed seriousness.

Beneath its civilized trappings, Benjamin’s mechanical debilitation thesis amounts to little more than a camel driver’s superstition: an absurd fear that each reproduction steals a portion of the original’s soul. He makes no distinction between the one-as-good-as-another effect of works designed to be equivalent multiples (e.g., suites of photographs or prints) and the transmittal effect of works intended merely to evoke an absent original (e.g., art-book reproductions of Michaelangelo’s *David*). Moreover, he fails to acknowledge that reproduction can many times enhance, rather than diminish, an object’s auratic quotient. The lens does not only, in the notorious manner of *Life* magazine or the *National Geographic*, denature and banalize content. Just as often, dramatic camera angles, skilled lighting, manipulation of contrasts and hues, isolation of poignant details, cunning juxtapositions, etc.—all the tricks of the *Vogue* stratagem—actually bolster aura, or even create it where it would not otherwise exist. “Aura is tied to presence,” Benjamin pontificates; “there can be no replica of it”—a pronouncement which would have astounded a photographer like George Hoyningen-Huene, who made a career of endowing former shop girls with exotic allure. Certainly works of art that are widely, and obsequiously, reproduced often become more authoritative, not less. Von Sternberg’s treatment of Marlene Dietrich’s face tell us infinitely more about the generation of aura than is dreamt of in Benjamin’s philosophy.

What is wrong here? Why are Benjamin’s confident predictions so persistently violated by reality? In large part, the answer is that,

in misunderstanding everyday people, Benjamin has misapprehended the nature of aesthetic interest. Because he wants to see the masterpiece as an instrument of intimidation, a device for duping the common man into approving his own subjugation, he does not consider that mass duplication may signify not a “bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality” but an act of homage to an ideal widely and sincerely esteemed. An Elvis fan does not prefer photo images to the living presence of the King himself; rather, she surrounds herself with his likenesses because they are all she can get—surrogates (quite the contrary of Benjamin’s “substitutes”) being far preferable to nothing at all. One worships, as beleaguered Catholics have long had to reiterate, not the statue but the holiness it conveys. In any case, it is unlikely that viewers would seek out, and spontaneously reproduce, works consecrated to their own humiliation. People naturally aspire to a better life; powerful works induce many copies. Given the largely mimetic nature of human character formation, there is no great mystery here.

By contrast, Benjamin’s attack on aura—particularly in his discussion of film—is itself mystifying and dangerous. The very fact that he reads an evolution from Leonardo, Raphael, and Rembrandt to Dreyer, Chaplin, and Vertov, from the *Anatomy Lesson* to *Three Songs About Lenin*, as aesthetic progress should alert us immediately that something is fatally amiss. Benjamin values film for precisely the wrong reasons: because its many sudden changes echo the “shock effects” of modern life; because it replaces individual contemplation with collective “reception in a state of distraction”; and because its capacity to dictate our perceptions from moment to moment make it a perfect vehicle for the primary business of postindustrial art—pre-emptory political manipulation of the perceived present and past.

It is exactly here that Benjamin’s failings and contradictions become most glaringly evident. Determined to display intellectual

cleverness by linking Hitler to Rembrandt, he totally neglects the demagogue's suave exploitation of putatively "nonauratic" mediums. Benjamin's 1936 prognosis is continually discredited by real-world events, as totalitarianism in the twentieth century (chez Messrs. Lenin, Franco, Stalin, Perón, Mao, Castro, Pol Pot, et al.) has been intimately connected not with unique and distant works of individual genius, but with accessible, highly reproducible forms—films, posters, photographs, statuettes—cynically deployed to disorient and indoctrinate a sadly noncontemplative public. The killers have their own use for distraction. Despite his advocacy of what, in "A Short History of Photography," he called "politically educated sight," Benjamin himself could not discern the most elemental political fact of his day: that advanced capitalism, guilty of the great evil of producing more than its own citizenry can consume, innately needs and promotes the free flow of people, resources, currencies, credit, technology, goods, and ideas associated with international peace; while monopoly socialism, by virtue of its chronic underproduction, has a nasty—and historically predictable—tendency to mug its most vulnerable neighbors.

"Communism responds by politicizing art." Indeed it does. In 1932, four years before Benjamin published "Mechanical Reproduction," Stalin brutally consolidated Russia's once diverse arts organizations into the monolithic Artists Union—with deadly results that even Brecht could not stomach. "There is no longer any doubt"—he told Benjamin in 1938, "the struggle against ideology has become a new ideology." Yet the sage was not persuaded by mere facts. His essay contains the gullible claim that "in the Soviet Union work itself is given a voice." Perhaps in 1932-33 Benjamin should have listened for that voice in the Ukraine, where five million workers starved to death while being forced to produce the wheat that was shipped off in sealed trains to Russia.

The historical fate of "Mechanical Repro-

duction" is, ironically, the essay's own best refutation. The text has become refulgently auratic, and many now regard Benjamin as an intellectual martyr whose name confers full and automatic justification on any allusion or quote. His word is scripture. This beatification did not, of course, occur spontaneously, but as the result of a calculated campaign by two generations of sponsors superbly well versed—and well placed—in what they themselves have snidely designated "the consciousness industry."

After the war, it was disclosed that the great bulk of Benjamin's papers had been safely preserved. George Bataille, with whom Benjamin had associated both before and after the polymath pornographer's 1937 break with André Breton, had deposited a large cache in the Bibliothèque Nationale, and from there it was later forwarded to Adorno as Benjamin had requested. Scholem held many copies of Benjamin's works in Jerusalem, along with an extensive correspondence. Even the Gestapo-confiscated material eventually emerged in East Germany. With these inchoate resources at hand, the hagiography could be undertaken in earnest.

In 1942, just two years after Benjamin's death, Adorno and Horkheimer—who had not been overly keen on publishing the "crude" Marxist during his lifetime—saw fit to honor him with a commemorative issue of the Institute's journal. Then, beginning in 1946, Pierre Missac, who had aided Bataille in the rescue of many of the ur-documents, began to release translations and interpretations in major French intellectual publications, thus cultivating an awareness of Benjamin among the eventual May 1968-era *philosophes*. Missac's work was crowned by the posthumous 1986 publication of his devout bio-critical study, *Passage de Walter Benjamin*.

The push gained greater momentum when Adorno persuaded his publisher, Peter Suhrkamp, to issue a two-volume, twelve-hundred-page edition of Benjamin's collected works. In his introduction to this 1955 tome, Adorno cast Benjamin as a lonely

existential hero, cunningly praising those very aspects of Benjamin's character and writing that had most crippled him as a serious thinker. Benjamin, we are told, "ignored the philosophic tradition and current rules of scientific logic," having early on resolved "always and exclusively to think in relation to already existing texts" and to rely on his highly imagistic "mythicizing trait." Benjamin's aphoristic "thought-images" thus remain philosophically inviolate—and conveniently impervious to dialectical challenge—because his entire way of thinking "excludes not just fundamental themes but all analytic techniques of composition, development, the whole mechanism of presupposition, assertion, and proof, of theses and conclusions." In other words, we are to esteem Benjamin as a philosopher who never subjected his raw talent to the traditions and protocols of that stringent profession, as though there were now some superior virtue in *not* being like Aristotle, Descartes, or Kant.

Once Benjamin's allegorizing cast of mind had been successfully sold to a few critics and the most susceptible portion of the cultural community (its would-be redeemers), the machinery of academic stardom could begin its inexorable grind. A selection of Benjamin's letters, edited by Adorno and Scholem, appeared in 1966. Between 1972 and 1988, six volumes of collected works were published. Scholem gave us *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* in 1975 and the pair's *Correspondence 1933-1940* in 1980. New Left Books issued four volumes in English translation from 1973 to 1979. The left-wing journal *October* devoted its Winter 1985 number to an English rendition of Benjamin's embarrassing *Moscow Diary*. So the PR continues—from the early 1970s on, a great spate of articles, translations, symposia, special issues, reviews, biographies, and critical studies in several languages by authors ranging from obscure tenure-trackers to eminences like George Steiner and Susan Sontag.

This process is common enough in a business where reputations are the grist of

other reputations. What amazes (and should disturb) is the escalating tone of transcendent rectitude and apostolic awe these writers adopt. In 1966, Hans Sahl unblushingly remembered Benjamin, attended by his young disciple at the Nevers internment camp, as "a holy man in his cave, watched over by an angel." In 1968, Hannah Arendt, in her introduction to *Illuminations*, an English-language collection of Benjamin essays, reinforced the existential-Benjamin motif by asserting pridefully that "the very notion of . . . becoming a useful member of society would have repelled him." In 1972, Scholem opened a memorial lecture by announcing that Benjamin's philosophic prose had "enormous suitability for canonization; I might almost say for quotation as a kind of Holy Writ." Finally, in 1978, the eminent Yale literary critic Peter Demetz, prefacing another English-language miscellany, *Reflections*, launched its protagonist into the radical-chic empyrean. This "master of hermeneutics," he wrote, can now be seen as "a pioneer in the semiotic tradition," a seer who "with astonishing foresight" (actually Demetz's 20/20 hindsight) anticipated "problems that today dominate our changing awareness of literature and media in the age of concrete poetry, Marshall McLuhan, and Jacques Derrida." Indeed, Demetz enthuses, "if the Eurocommunists develop a theory of culture, Benjamin will be one of their saints."

It is a peculiar world in which Leonardo and the *Mona Lisa* are said to have no aura, while Walter Benjamin and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" are deemed virtually holy. For the open Benjaminian secret is that aura has not been dispelled but merely displaced—from allegedly naïve or conscienceless artistic accomplishment to "advanced" and "responsible" critical theory. This shift gives rise to a new and highly refined breed of censorship, innately hostile to the old notion of aesthetic quality. High standards—to say nothing of genius—are extremely difficult to explain and impossible to regiment

politically; but mediocre talent, like the social gospel which teaches it to overvalue itself, can be easily controlled.

The first generation of Benjamin admirers had a straightforward, and relatively benign, use for the “saint” they invented. At a time when safe Germanic cultural emissaries were very much needed, Benjamin could be sent forth as a veritable embodiment of everything opposed to the Nazi ideal and the Hitlerian persona. Bumbling and endearingly Chaplinesque in his manner, he could, with his obfuscations fulfilling one popular misconception of philosophical brilliance, serve as social criticism’s own version of the wildly popular Einstein—a quaint counter-Fuehrer, a mirror-reverse image of the Reich’s Evil One: Jew vs. persecutor of Jews, child of privilege vs. rude parvenu, disdainer of titles vs. crazed pursuer of spurious glory, high-cultural gentleman vs. low Volkish thug, noble failure vs. catastrophic success. The world, having survived the Aryan madness, was no doubt ready to be redeemed by the missionaries of the Frankfurt Institute. Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas, and Marcuse would now have at their disposal not only Marx the Father but also Benjamin, the mystical Francis-of-Assisi-like intercessor.

A generation later, who benefits from Walter Benjamin’s beatification, and what precisely do they stand to gain? Career academics, of course, can now profitably mine the massive *Complete Works* and the interminable secondary sources; trash-infatuated artists and their dealers can make an easier killing among the gullible rich; and new-wave curators with more fashion savvy than aesthetic—or moral—integrity no longer have to *look* at politically correct art to determine its inherent worthiness. But all these are no more than pawns to the real winners—a cartel of leftist ideologues who reap increasing power through the systematic debasement of art.

These champions of liberation are easily identified by their ulterior goals: derogation of Western cultural achievement; discrediting of the United States as govern-

mental model; elevation (without regard to intrinsic worth) of all marginal art forms and producers judged politically useful; suppression of any genuinely popular expression of orthodox religious, ethnic, or patriotic fervor (unless it arises from a safely exotic Third World source); reflex obeisance to all feminist and minority claims; and, above all, adamant opposition to “late capitalism”—except insofar as one benefits personally from its grants, royalties, write-offs, fees, and paychecks.

From their laughably amateurish “unmaskings” of corporate practices, it is clear that this group of writers knows almost nothing at all about the actual operations of capital. (Would any practicing economist base an investment decision on Guy Debord’s rantings about “spectacle”? Can Jean-François Lyotard tell a gross-return-on-margin from a modified-accelerated-cost-recovery?) What they peddle instead are mere psychological oddity and ideological purity, commingled into a presiding cult of peculiarity. Only that is acceptable, only that is art, which stands starkly at odds with the norms of the “bourgeois” world that these writers are determined to destroy. “No one can improve his school or his parental home without first smashing the state that needs bad ones,” is how St. Benjamin so charmingly puts it. Pornography, in both its political and sexual manifestations, here performs an invaluable service, since hideous caricature—of sex, of foreign policy, of daily life in the United States—can be counted on to rile things up any time an indulgent populace seems insufficiently outraged.

But the cleverest radical subterfuge is the attempt to destabilize the free-market system by dissociating artistic quality from price. To be quite Benjaminesque about it, there must be more than a coincidental connection between monopoly socialism’s miserable production record, the gross inferiority of its consumer goods (those awful shoes and apartment complexes and ill-fitting suits), the politically doleful lives of its hostage populations, the lugubriousness of its Western apologists’ thinking and prose, and the junk

art those apologists so assiduously champion. This is more than the usual collectivist denial of individual achievement and individual pleasure. It is psychic transfer and cultural revenge. Informed by Marx that capitalism's producers *must* be alienated both from their labor and its fruits, this band of writers critically promotes works that truly are shoddy and alienating in the fond hope that bad art will, through a runaway aesthetic inflation, drive out the good and thus fulsomely fulfill their direst prophecy. For nothing so dismays our oppositional ideologues as the ability of free economic and artistic markets to give the people what, for better or for worse, they actually want and at the same time to generate works of insuperable excellence: to sustain both the top forty and the Juilliard School of Music. The Western standard of living is a devastating materialist rebuke to the most cherished Marxist myths. Therefore the facts must be denied, as a pornography of schlock is promulgated in this last-gasp attempt to subvert an entrepreneurial system that shouldn't work, but so ineluctably does.

It is self-evident that a classless society cannot be created by fiat. Factual history—that great despoiler of Marxist theory—suggests strongly that the market of free acts and ideas is inseparable from the free market of goods. Certainly before any group can attempt to control production, it must first regulate imagination and delimit desire; it must tyrannize thought. A command economy requires commanders. This lust for authority explains why our radicals “privilege,” yea even “fetishize,” the egregiously second-rate. Television, Disneyland, B

movies, pop music, French philo-babble, cutely uninhabitable architecture, and, of course, great swaths of pretentious junk art—all these are easy to talk about. Indeed, they invite talk to take precedence. “Dallas” may be nothing but good-natured pap, but the things one can say about it as “a vehicle of cultural imperialism” have a power exceeding that of their putative subject. The theory becomes immeasurably more interesting and creative than the art, which shrivels to, at best, an excuse for or illustration of current “critical” doctrine. What the masterpiece was to dignity, junk art is to contempt. The strategy is to cheapen whatever aesthetic goods most people can afford, and to render ludicrous those they cannot. Then alone can Benjamin's advocates emerge as an enlightened vanguard capable of guiding and educating the world's toiling artist-producers.

Let us be under no illusions about the charity of these iron saints. They are resolved to allow common viewers no immediate access—and preferably no access at all—to works of high purpose and high accomplishment. “The proletariat can be trained,” Benjamin has admonished, “. . . only under the protection of dictatorship.” After all, a populace astute in its response to quality and confident of its own human worth might be foolishly unreceptive to Marxist rescue. For such is the great betrayal Benjamin and his acolytes represent. What we see in their alleged liberality is nothing other than the workings of a ruthlessly coercive agenda, just as their highly selective “pluralism” turns out to be a thinly veiled disdain for the real aspirations of the vast majority of the earth's citizens.

A poem *by Brad Leithauser* &
a translation from the Italian
of Leopardi *by John Herington*

The caller

After the final and all-
But-unnecessary bell, most everyone
Already gone, might come a few last wheeling
Cries, goodbyes, sometimes a brief
Stab of laughter, the last light sliding
Footfalls of this year's children, or
The so much weightier, wider striding
Of one of her colleagues, sweeping the hall
Of its echoes, and then, wider yet, a feeling
Of feeling the building itself being done
For the day—as if it, too, waited for
This moment, and met it with relief.

So she would sit. The room was hers. Late
Afterschool sun climbed the legs
Of the pine desk turned out, years ago,
From the town's own mill. From here: a view
Of Stoner's Hardware, the billiard hall,
And past the tracks, and drearier
Still, the shacklike houses where the town dregs
Lived out their shackled lives, and lastly, below
The town, and also well above it all—
Gray as steel sometimes, sometimes a blue
Earth's freshest eye could but approximate—
The Lake, the only one, her Superior.

So she would sit, and smoke. Her reign here,
In this very room, was now closing upon
Three decades, but always she'd felt bound,
At least until this, her fifty-seventh year,
Never to light up inside it.
Before, she'd shut herself up in what
Was grandly called The Faculty Salon—
That dark and dreary hole. But
No more, no more attempting to hide it . . .
She'd watch the Lake and light up openly—
For anyone and everyone to see—
Had there been, at this hour, someone still around.

Once this same lake was sailed by a giant
Soul, Henry Longfellow, who drifted
On purest tides of inspiration—
This the shining Big-Sea-Water
Of the Arrow Maker's Daughter,
The belov'd of Hiawatha. Oh,
Poetry! On the walls it was Keats, Blake—
Both lamb and tiger—Lanier and Bryant,
And Longfellow over the window, so
The right imagination might be ever lifted
At having read, early on, lines and lake
Together. But where was that imagination?

So she would sit, doubting and smoking freely,
In this her fifty-seventh year. She knew she'd
Scared them all, from the children on up, really:
Parents, teachers—and that squirming sinner
Of a superintendent, too. And she didn't need
Her height to work this on them, though
As for that, proudly six feet tall she stood. No,
This was the fear that those that have no inner
Elevation always feel for those that do.
She knew her poetry. And by God she knew
There wasn't a soul in this sawdust town
Who could, when she felt rightful, stare her down.

(*What a scowl that woman had!* . . . And by
Such phrases, a few thin anecdotes, and one brown
Photograph, this woman, Lucinda Stitt, came down
To me. That's her younger brother, my
Great-uncle Chuck beside her, his cane
The hook to a youthful mishap at the mill.
They lived together. He grins, but she—it's plain—
Distrusts the photographer, whose portrait, cracked
As it is, bears all her rightfulness intact.
She's in her prime, clearly, with some time still
Before cracks of another sort would appear—
In that, her fifty-seventh year.)

What queerish notions, at day's end, brooding
Brings to mind! Sitting, smoking, in a gray-
Golden cloud, she'd wind up recalling
A chant—the boys—so many years ago—and how
Angry it once made her—how angry even now!
. . . She would be newly burning at the way
They had gone on, the boys, including
That jug-eared Gus Gustafsson, bawling
Lucinda, Lucinda, she fell out of the winda.
This was for them the height of wit!
Poetry's paragon! She heard them, chanting it
Stupidly still: *Lucinda, Lucinda* . . .

What was the use of home at night,
His slap of fork and spoon, the lounging phlegm
In his throat, the clearing of that throat
To usher in the utterance of one more gem
Of wisdom? What earthly use? Better to float
Right here, on tides of smoke, still in sight
Of the Lake—gray as steel, blue as flame—
And turn on not one light, but let the room
Go gold, go gray, knowing that of course
He would come, for there was no force
Under heaven to keep him back, come on the same
Cane-clatter, to coax her down from the gloom.

(*Well, she was an odd one, that one, Brad,*
My grandpa once told me, with a curved
Nudge to the glance maybe meant to suggest,
Man-to-future-man, that she was one who'd had
No use for men. And yet, on a raw,
Rain-paned fall afternoon, Grandma imparted
A counter impression, when she observed,
What a man never seems to realize
Is that even the stoniest
Looking woman may be broken hearted,
And for the first and only time I saw
A sort of soupy look come into her eyes.)

In winter, ice worked its way outwards from
The shore, outreaching just as if, at last,
About to hazard an actual crossing,
But always followed days of accounting
When, loud as riflefire, it shattered to show
The bright blue burning down below.
No log burned blue as that tossing
Water burned . . . Whyever did it call her so
Fiercely, that blue out of blue, as if some
Answer were wanted she could not give it, no,
It wasn't inside her, no, as the days passed,
Summer coming on, the sun remounting

The legs of her desk, as she waited for the light
To fade, for the ever later dark to come,
For an escape from that man, her clown-
Like caller, looking for all the world like some
Laughably miscast swain in one of the absurd
Town theatricals, mooning out there
On the playground, school being locked up tight,
His round face trained on her upper
Row of windows, baying Come on down,
And scratching his ear, wondering if she'd heard,
Then baying, sweetly, Come down,
Come down, Lucinda, I've made you supper.

Dark would go the walls, rhyme on rhyme,
Now bringing unavoidably to mind
How these were nothing but words in the failing
Glow, one with the down-slipping dust-
Motes, streaks on the glass, red, threadbare
Carpet on the creaking bottom stair
Of home, some other home, and sooner, later,
The Lake must swallow them all, just
As it swallowed, now and then, a skater,
A sailor, whose bodies are flailing
All on the Lakefloor together, blind
As life, as light, as Time;

And colder than ice, somehow, that shattering
Water, and always him coming, clattering
His stick, calling Come down, as if some use
To that, but oh, let him wait, and wait for
The match to bite and the letting loose
Of another ghost of smoke, him calling at the winda,
The window, her name, that man, who won't go 'way,
Shattering the peace, your peace, calling Lucinda,
But he can wait for you, you needn't—no—
Answer, not until you've lit one more
Of the cigarettes that, with each passing day,
Prove harder to light your hands are shaking so.

—Brad Leithauser

Coro di morti nello studio di Federico Ruysch

Sola nel mondo eterna, a cui si volge
Ogni creata cosa,
In te, morte, si posa
Nostra ignuda natura;
Lieta no, ma sicura
Dall'antico dolor. Profonda notte
Nella confusa mente
Il pensier grave oscura;
Alla speme, al desio, l'arido spirto
Lena mancar si sente:
Così d'affanno e di temenza è sciolto,
E l'età vote e lente
Senza tedio consuma.
Vivemmo: e qual di paurosa larva,
E di sudato sogno,
A lattante fanciullo erra nell'alma
Confusa ricordanza:
Tal memoria n'avanza
Del viver nostro: ma da tema è lunge
Il rimembrar. Che fummo?
Che fu quel punto acerbo
Che di vita ebbe nome?
Cosa arcana e stupenda
Oggi è la vita al pensier nostro, e tale
Qual de' vivi al pensiero
L'ignota morte appar. Come da morte
Vivendo rifuggia, così rifugge
Dalla fiamma vitale
Nostra ignuda natura;
Lieta no ma sicura,
Però ch'esser beato
Nega ai mortali e nega a' morti il fato.

—*Giacomo Leopardi*

Chorus of the dead
in the laboratory of Frederick Ruysch

(from the *Operette Morali* of Giacomo Leopardi)

Alone in all the world eternal,
the end of each created thing,
 Death,
our naked being rests on You,
not happy, no, but safe
from the ancient sorrow. In our baffled mind
deep night shades over heavy thought.
Our arid spirit feels no longing
now, for hope nor for desire,
and so from care and terror free
unwearied, it devours
slow and hollow centuries.

 Once we lived,
and as a child confusedly remembers
(child sucking sweetly at the breast)
nightmare and sweatsoaked dream,
such is the memory that stays for us
of Life; and yet that memory is far from fear.

 What were we?
What was that cruel point
that held the name of Life?
Secret and awesome
is Life now to our thinking,
as to the thinking of the living
seems unknown Death. As it recoiled in living
from Death, so from the flame of Life recoils
 our naked being,
not happy, no, but safe.

 For happiness
Fate will not grant to mortals or to dead.

—*translated from the Italian*
by John Herington

The Philharmonic chooses a music director

by *Samuel Lipman*

We ought to be happy. Several weeks ago, the New York Philharmonic finally found a music director of acceptable, and even high, musical credentials. In enlisting Kurt Masur for what has been variously described as ten or eighteen weeks annually, the Philharmonic was not so much making an artistic choice as splitting its musical ticket. It has an agreement with the always-salable Leonard Bernstein to head the orchestra for several weeks in each of the coming seasons. Furthermore, the Philharmonic will be relying on the perennial guest conductor Erich Leinsdorf, and perhaps also on Sir Colin Davis, for several weeks each season as well.

It is not clear what this all adds up to. In Kurt Masur, the Philharmonic has chosen a first-class representative of the German musical tradition playing German masterpieces. It cannot be overlooked, after all, that Masur has for many years now been the director of the orchestra of the Leipzig Gewandhaus, an ensemble founded in the 1840s by none other than Felix Mendelssohn. Mr. Masur has come by his classical traditions honestly, and one is happy to say that the honesty shows in his conducting. But important as honesty is—and God knows it has been in short supply during the vulgar Zubin Mehta days—it is only a precondition for musical expression, not its fulfillment. It can be said, and doubtless deserves to be said, in Mr. Masur's defense that the musical qualities beyond honesty—originality and excitement—are scarcely

available today. But facts are facts and it would be a great mistake—and very harmful to Mr. Masur—to overpromise what might be expected from his tenure in New York.

Alas, one's monitions are scarcely limited to fears of any absence of originality in Mr. Masur's work. The problem of course is that music directors, though they are very much conductors, are also very much more than conductors. Music directors form taste: they form the taste of the audience, of music critics, and even of other sophisticated musicians. It is difficult to see how Mr. Masur, who will be bringing to us a music we know in performances whose outlines are more than familiar to us, can do very much about forming New York's musical tastes.

Dismaying as this worry may be, there is another worry that is yet more disquieting, and this worry involves perhaps the most important function of a music director, which is to build and train a great orchestra. No matter how talented, well-trained, and experienced orchestra musicians are—and the Philharmonic has some of the best players in the world—an orchestra does not play by itself. In fact, every attempt at leaderless symphony orchestras, whenever undertaken, has failed. For all their autocratic ways, conductors are judged by how well they make the orchestra play as an ensemble—in other words, as a team.

Alas, conductorial leadership is not exerted on a casual, part-time, or intermittent basis. It can only be manifested through

regular, frequent, and ongoing applications of authority and discipline. Not only is it as yet unclear how much time Mr. Masur will actually devote to the orchestra, it is unclear just what kind of sway he can exercise in the presence of such conductors as Bernstein, Leinsdorf, and Davis. No music director, surely, would choose to find himself responsible for disciplining an orchestra more than half of whose concerts are led by guest conductors whose basic approach toward getting the best performance possible must of necessity be the display of a gentle mien and a pleasing manner. It is sadly clear that Leonard Bernstein in particular has these days not the slightest interest in training an orchestra, and indeed wishes to be loved by all and sundry who come within his ambit. It is idle to think that any real trainer of orchestras can always, or even frequently, be popular with his players: the case of George Szell and the peculiar combination of trembling and loathing in which he was held by the Cleveland Orchestra during its greatest years has something to tell us about the psychological conditions necessary for the making of a great orchestra.

Then there is the problem of repertory. As I mentioned earlier, Mr. Masur, given the particular conditions under which he has worked in East Germany, is a specialist in a narrowly defined Germanic orchestral literature. It is true that this literature is the cornerstone of our musical tradition. It is arguable that in the orchestral works of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms one has a freestanding body of greatness, perhaps sufficient for most audiences most of the time. But to leave matters at this is to make of music—even immortal masterpieces—a collection in a museum, a great museum it is true, but a museum nonetheless. The only possibility for avoiding the consignment of music to the museum is to leaven the greatest masterpieces with music that has come from elsewhere, and especially has come later.

When I say this I am not simply referring to Tchaikowsky, Mahler, Richard Strauss,

**Paul
CADMUS**

**Enrico
DONATI**

**Dimitri
HADZI**

**Edward
HOPPER**

**Matsumi
KANEMITSU**

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Debussy, and Ravel. I am not even referring just to those sadly few twentieth-century works that give every sign of lasting—the works, for instance, of Bartók, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich, to name three. I am really talking, since, after all, we do live in America, about the American contribution to symphonic music. It will be no secret to my readers that I find American orchestral writing, along with American chamber-music writing, of the 1930s, 1940s, and part of the 1950s—the music of, among others, Piston, Hanson, Harris, Copland, Barber, William Schuman, David Diamond, and perhaps even the now totally forgotten Peter Mennin—to be music on the highest level of our century, uniquely evocative of the world out of which it comes, and also a marvelous addition to classical programs.

I know that it will be said that the Philharmonic, in employing Leonard Bernstein, will be giving us the work of someone who is not only a distinguished American composer in his own right but a conductor who in the past has performed valiant services for American music. But it must be said that Mr. Bernstein's services to American music seem to have ceased in his discovery in the 1960s of the music of Bruckner and Mahler. More, after all, was involved in the shifting of Mr. Bernstein's allegiances in the 1970s from New York to Vienna than a simple change of address. By some personal alchemy, he

managed to make himself an *echt*-Viennese conductor of *echt*-Viennese music. The distance from the Vienna of Mahler to the New York of Aaron Copland may be short in miles but is immense in terms of the musical spirit. It is clear, then, that Mr. Bernstein can be counted on to bring little distinctive of American music in his coming years of guest conducting with the Philharmonic.

If Mr. Bernstein can be expected to bring little, Mr. Leinsdorf and Sir Colin can be counted on to bring nothing. Mr. Leinsdorf, though much praised these days for his ingenuity in program making, seems to do little more than to impose artificial intellectual schemes—for example, every piece on the program having similar titles or being inspired by similar literary sources—upon the patience of his audiences. Sir Colin, though much beloved in England, and rightly so, is unfortunately another genial maestro who so far has shown little of originality in musical conception: it would be unreasonable to project him as the Philharmonic's American music savior.

We in New York, and across this country, now have need of a strong New York Philharmonic. We all wish the orchestra well, for our sake as well as theirs. The one thing that we can be sure of is that the Masur performances will be vastly superior to the Mehta ones. Perhaps in a bad time, that is enough.

Theater

British fustian

by Donald Lyons

I first encountered *Aspects of Love* as a musical at the Broadhurst, and the experience left me with such unusual questions that I found myself on the trail of an enigma, like the hero of a detective story. The musical, adapted from a 1955 novella by a minor Bloomsburyite, tracks five people in France from 1947 to 1964: a French actress, an elderly English painter, his soldier nephew, an Italian sculptress, and, in the last years, the adolescent daughter of the painter and the actress. These characters engage in a bewildering merry-go-round of affairs and near-affairs, clumsily and jerkily presented. Narrative coherence seems less important, however, on stage than the unremitting attempts to establish that we are in a sophisticated, "artistic" ambience. Dialogue worthy (or perhaps unworthy) of Judith Krantz bombards us: "That's my only genuine Matisse" . . . "She's off to make a madcap movie with Monsieur Cocteau" . . . "I met him in Harry's Bar" . . . "Coffee and croissant?" A Parisian exhibition of chic sculpture is suggested by a Daliesque lip-shaped sofa and a ceiling hung with giant gloves. And by way of psychology and philosophy, everyone exchanges pellets of psychobabble about how we mustn't waste today and how love is like champagne and how human nature must be accepted for what it is and how death is a carnival. But this boulevard wisdom is as often forgotten on stage: one character shoots another; there are at least two heart attacks (one fatal)

brought on by anger; there are tantrums at the circus and in the vineyard and at the theater; all are wretched. There is a puzzling malaise, an unconscious dissonance to the proceedings at the Broadhurst.

Aspects of Love is, as I've mentioned, a musical, with music by the English composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyrics by Don Black and Charles Hart. Mr. Lloyd Webber is a glib adapter, catholically ready to attune T. S. Eliot (*Cats*) or Gaston Leroux (*Phantom of the Opera*). Among his musical inspirations are usually cited Puccini and Leonard Bernstein; the former seemed a remote presence indeed at the Broadhurst, but I did find myself humming some songs from *Candide* on leaving the theater. Mr. Lloyd Webber's wonted style is to introduce early and recapitulate often a few swooning melodies—here especially a vapid ditty warning that "Love Changes Everything, Love Will Never Let You Be the Same." But because of his sophomoric musicianship, these reiterations have the effect less of an operatic Total Art Work than of a novice endlessly practicing a few chords in the next apartment. (For the same technique used with a witty and winning lightness, see *City of Angels*.)

The sets have a saturnine grandiosity: mountains split open; twilight creeps over a beach; a vineyard is shaken by a sudden, violent storm. But this grandiosity is often inappropriate (as when a simple farmhouse is got up to resemble a beetling Dickensian

warehouse) and is always absurd, a blunt and unpleasant mechanical substitute for the disastrously missing human sense. The director, Trevor Nunn, quick-times the players around the parting peaks; his work is mere traffic control. The players exhibit a certain cheery competence found in, say, British provincial theaters of a weeknight. Only the suave Australian Kevin Colson as the elderly painter manages occasionally, as in a song about the miraculousness of having a daughter, to suggest a real emotion.

Gnawed by my incomprehension of the Lloyd Webber work, I looked up the book on which it is based, a novella of the same title by David Garnett. I found it at least more at home in, more master of, its cultural territory than the illiterate musical. The figure of the actress, Rose, a dazzling stage artist who passes serenely from nephew to uncle to nephew again to virtually anonymous young lovers, is a cipher in the book as well as in the play—a mere gesture toward the formulaic Frenchwoman wise in the ways of love. Rose has her source in novels, not life; one thinks of, at best, Colette and of Madame de Vionnet in *The Ambassadors*. The Italian is a heterosexual Marquesa in the book (did I mention her sapphic dabblings in the musical?) and is called an artist, but she *and* her art are mercifully invisible most of the time. The nephew (Alexis in the book; Alex on stage) is the standard *ingenu* undergoing a painful apprenticeship in *l'amour*; Garnett's sketchy attempts to pursue him into adulthood, complete with a military career high up in the counsels of NATO, are hopelessly vague.

But it is the uncle, Sir George Dillingham, who is the moral center of the book, embodying and expressing its ripe verdicts upon life. First, he looks the part: "He was a lean figure in a loosely fitting Shetland tweed suit of blended grey and moorit wool; he wore a tussore silk shirt with a Leander tie pulled through a heavy gold and aquamarine ring." This is, from the pen of Garnett, the language of love. And this Sir George is not a painter but a poet, and a good one, grudgingly praised by his nephew:

His poetry does not interest me. It is curiously flat, without verbal richness or grandeur, or any attempt at wit. And it is not at all technically exciting. But in his flat way he does seem to be able to deal with delicate and complex emotions, and to be able to reduce them to manageable proportions. Rather like reflecting the moon in a bucket of water. That's a good comparison, for his poetry is rather Chinese. Waley has influenced him more than Eliot, or the younger men.

Garnett probably has Osbert Sitwell in mind as model for this side of Sir George and clearly regards his Sitwellian Sir George as an artist of stature. But these elegant inanities succeed only in unmasking Garnett's helpless incapacity to talk about poetry. And Garnett's Sir George was intimate with the finest spirits of his age. As Rose explains to a sullen Alexis: "He has made me enter into the past. Through him I have learned to understand the generation which knew Sarah and Duse and Proust and Gide. George has a fascination that no boy of your age could offer. I owe it entirely to George that I am almost free of the traditional vices of the ordinary actress." One can only marvel at the homeopathic system of Sir George's that sought to teach avoidance of actressy vices by means of exposure to "Sarah." At his death, Sir George is eulogized by the wise Marquesa as an exemplar of the epicurean ethos: "He understood and loved food and wine. More than either, he loved and understood women and many women were enriched by his love. But unlike the men of the Renaissance, he was also a creature of great delicacy of taste and feeling. However passionate he might be, however strong his appetite, he was never selfish . . . he was the least arrogant of men . . . Luckily both his gusto and his delicacy showed themselves in his work. He was not like any of the poets of today. He was nearest to the Latin poets . . ." and so on. We have here, pretty obviously, a self-portrait by David Garnett; one can hear the quickened pulse of authorial approval in these extravagant and paradoxical benedictions (paradoxical

because unselfishness might be thought, in real life, to seldom consort with this programmatic hedonism).

Sir George is Garnett's consummate portrait of the artist. But the style of this portrait, in all its "day-dream self-indulgence" (in Leavis's phrase about Maggie Tulliver), is both abstract—except sartorially—and expository. The anemic abstractness of Garnett's prose can be contrasted to the vivid, obsessed particularity of such genuine investigators of aestheticism as Proust and the Nabokov of *Invitation of a Beheading*. And the praise always comes secondhand; others laud Sir George as the nonpareil *bon viveur*. He himself makes his appearances in the novella moping and fretting and ailing; he is in fact a tormented melancholic who dies in a paroxysm of anguish at the prospect of his thirteen-year-old daughter's putting his philosophy into practice with his thirty-four-year-old nephew, the ex-lover of his wife. But Garnett shows absolutely no awareness of the chasm between Sir George's stated ethic and his behavior. That eulogy is entirely without irony.

So a mystery remained: How explain the odd discontinuity at the heart of the book? A clue was at hand in the theater program, in a little essay by Michael Wood mentioning that Garnett "at the age of forty-eight . . . snubbed convention . . . by embarking on an affair with the twenty-two-year-old Angelica Bell. They married in 1942, arousing a descendant of disapproval" from, among others, Angelica's aunt, Virginia Woolf. So Garnett had himself entered into a marriage of greater age disparity than the one Sir George, Garnett's surrogate, so opposes in *Aspects of Love*. While in general believing that criticism can operate without biographical contraband, I felt, prompted by Mr. Wood, that here the life might relevantly illumine the imperfections of the art. I pursued the story. It's a lulu. Painter Vanessa Stephen Bell (sister of Virginia Stephen Woolf) was married to writer Clive Bell and had two sons by him. While married, she fell in love with and had a daughter by the almost totally homosexual painter Duncan Grant,

who was having an affair as well at the time (this is 1918) with the largely heterosexual novelist David Garnett. On the day—Christmas 1918—of the birth of the little girl, who was called Angelica Bell, Garnett, prey to complex jealousies, wrote to Lytton Strachey about his lover's daughter: "I think of marrying it; when she is twenty, I shall be 46—will it be scandalous?" And over the years, as Angelica was growing up in a friendless and chilly home, Garnett did not lose sight of his curious intent. He calculatedly romanced and bedazzled and seduced the poor unloved mouse of an Angelica when she was twenty, although his wife and the mother of his children was at the time dying of cancer. He wed Angelica in 1942 after his wife's death. They had four daughters; the marriage lasted until the early 1970s, when Angelica broke away, to the lasting irritation of David, who died in 1981 in his beloved France. It is the saddest of stories, recounted most poignantly in a little 1985 memoir by Angelica Garnett called *Deceived with Kindness: A Bloomsbury Childhood*. The memoir is an artless tale of the manipulation of the innocent. What Angelica knew—of Vanessa, of Clive, of Duncan, of David "Bunny" Garnett—was tragically little. Her final verdict on the author of *Aspects of Love* is this:

Bunny, though I think he was actuated by selfishness, egotism and perhaps revenge—none of them attractive characteristics—and though this led him to make a victim of an ignorant and unsuspecting girl unable to defend herself, was not entirely a villain. As well as loving me for being Vanessa and Duncan's daughter, he loved me for myself, and in many ways he was singularly generous.

I now felt close to the secret of *Aspects of Love*'s startling disharmonies. Ostensibly a paean to irresponsible hedonism, it betrays in its broken nature guilt and remorse and a consciousness of wrong.

But, of course, a schizophrenic day-dream—let alone a scatterbrained musical extracted therefrom—cannot accomplish

the analytic clarity of art. The character of Sir George, exquisite savorer of life, kept reminding me of a figure in another novel, who "thought of himself as . . . the first gentleman of Europe." I mean the fastidious and corrupt aesthete Gilbert Osmond (husband of the innocent Isabel Archer but also the lover of Madame Merle and the father by Merle of little Pansy) in Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, written in 1876. *Aspects of Love* emerges as Gilbert Osmond's self-justifying reworking of *Portrait of a Lady*, suppressing the grown Isabel Archer character entirely (Angelica Bell the adult) and presenting only the blank page of the girl Pansy, to whom the Osmond character is represented as a solicitous parent. Small wonder, then, that such confusions of intent did not issue in a coherent work. The novella does have a curiosity value and, rightly read, is a damning indictment of the whole Bloomsbury sensibility. But for a tragic and lucid articulation of its themes, we must read the Gilbert Osmond story as written not by himself but by Henry James.

Dying is easy; it's comedy that is hard, as the old joke has it. And one of comedy's toughest challenges is to incorporate ideas. *Lettice & Lovage* is a comedy, with serious shadings, about two contemporary English gentlewomen of contrasting temperaments—the one sanguine and the other choleric. It is a pattern happily ingrained in comedy; Mosca and Valpone, for instance, exemplify such an alliance of humors. Sanguine here is Lettice Douffet, a guide at Fustian Hall in rustic Wiltshire. Bored at having to repeat the same information about the dank Elizabethan pile to endless flocks of tourists, nettled at their supine passivity, she takes to embroidering upon the humdrum history of the place. Soon she is reenacting chimerical tableaux of the Virgin Queen all but toppling off the staircase and of a Restoration heiress crippled on her wedding day by an excited wolf. Such histrionics bring the Mistress of Misrule to the sober attention of Choleric Authority, in the person of Lotte Schoen, who supervises the

Hall for the Public Trust. Lotte is all gray disapproval; Letitia is all red defiance (literally so at a bravura moment when she casts aside, in Lotte's office, a black cloak of mock penitence to reveal a blazing scarlet gown beneath).

But then slowly—indeed for the rest of the play—the two contrasting humors become complementary. The women discover a common enthusiasm and a common antipathy. They love the noble past and hate the phlegmatic present, but with differing emphases. Letitia, having a bizarre theatrical past (her mother ran a company of French maidens performing Shakespeare in French in the Dordogne), fastens dramatically upon the decapitated royal martyrs Mary Queen of Scots, Charles I, and Marie Antoinette—indeed upon the very moments of their decapitation. Lotte's attachment is to the buildings of the past, above all the Georgian; she dwells in a dark anger at the ubiquitous sight of their destruction. To make a too-long play short, the two decide at last to incorporate their loathing of modernity; they will conduct anti-tour tours, organized by Lotte, of recent buildings, in which Letitia will expound upon imaginary horrors perpetrated in these (alas) very unimaginary examples of "brutalist" architecture. Ludic Play and Order have joined hands.

Peter Shaffer is the author of this—he of *Equus* and *Amadeus*. At least here there is no question of exploring the nature of madness or genius, no *vulgarisation* of the modish sociopsychology of Laing. This time, Mr. Shaffer picks homely matter. And he does some deft things with it. Letitia's bouts of Misrule are hilarious. Her early clashes with Lotte have an air of Shakespearean parody, as of the role-playing in the tavern in *Henry IV*. Or better, they are like Maxwell Anderson's middlebrow *Elizabeth the Queen* played as farce. In a word, almost everything connected with Letitia *plays*. But Mr. Shaffer is not up to coping with the Choleric One: he gives Lotte a (remembered) father plunged into despair by the bombing of Dresden; he saddles her with a "terrorist"

past (she nearly planted a bomb in a skyscraper); he has her actually grazed by an ax in the course of the play. And this overdetermining and fumbling comprise much of the last two-thirds of the evening. Inadequate thinking results in inadequate technique. So dour is the character of Lotte that the joyfully anarchic scheme projected at the end will surely, one feels, be stillborn. The *Times* critic, rightly sensing something unachieved in Lotte, hinted that what was missing was lesbianism. While one can be thankful that Mr. Shaffer eschewed that well-traveled dramaturgical shortcut, one regrets that he found no solution at all. Perhaps, on second thought, he does still have a case of equamaditis—his dramaturgy can neither be satisfied with light liquids, à la Noel Coward's *Fallen Angels*, nor can it digest solid food.

The solid food Mr. Shaffer tries to wolf down here is, of course, the stuff of storied controversy. Long ago John Betjeman, bitter at the architectural rape of England, ironically exhorted:

Cut down that timber! Bells, too many and
strong,
Pouring their music through the branches
bare,
From moon-white church-towers down
the windy air
Have peeled the centuries out with Evensong.

And today a new Charles raises his voice against Roundhead erections, in accents echoed in this play by Lotte's comparison of the piddling damage done by the Luftwaffe to the major gaps left by native razers. All this could be meat and drink to a thoughtful dramatist; think of *Bartholomew Fair*'s way with an earlier London. But Mr. Shaffer has not decided on what he wants to do with it: his past (Fustian Hall) is a gimcrack attic; his future (Computex House) is a gimcrackier prison; there is no positive value among the play's ideas, for all the worried prattle about vanished "color."

In *Lettice & Lovage* Mr. Shaffer has set out to infuse the passions of a Betjeman into the world of Barbara Pym. But the playwright has no real grasp of Betjeman or of Pym—or even of Prince Charles, who after all bases his theories of past cultural harmonies not upon the camp nostalgia flaunted here but upon the relationship of civilization to God. Pym's total at-homeness in her world of Evensong and tins of baked beans and toilet paper—I am thinking of *Excellent Women*—and her profound thinking through of her values, qualities praised once and for all by Philip Larkin, are exactly the kind of thing missing from this play. But I do thank Mr. Shaffer for sending me back to Pym. It was one of the two lasting pleasures the play gave me.

The other was the performance of Maggie Smith as Letitia. Before praising Miss Smith, I have to say that Margaret Tyzack as Lotte seemed too enmeshed in her role's unresolved darknesses—Margaret Rutherford wrestling with the part of Lady Macbeth. But Miss Smith's is an exuberant, pyrotechnical display of ripe comic styling—ripe flirting with but never kissing over-ripe. She knows how to read a laugh line, elongating the vowels, spitting the consonants, sinking the pitch. Her rendition of the Fustian motto, *Lapsu Surgo* ("By my fall I rise"), is an ineradicable instance. She knows how to contort her polychrome red-on-white English beauty into the freakish attitudes of farce. (Do all the best *farceurs* have, like Maggie Smith and Buster Keaton, a grave beauty?) I'd always been a bit disappointed in her on screen; she seemed strained in comedy and *miserabiliste* in melodrama. But one was told, "Ah, but on stage and in Congreve . . ." Well, this is not Congreve, but they were right. She looks like Moira Shearer; she moves like Joyce Grenfell; and she sounds like Ethel Barrymore—which is pleasingly apt, as *Lettice & Lovage* is playing at the Ethel Barrymore Theater.

How to build a museum: the example of Louis Kahn

by Roger Kimball

You don't know what the building is, really, unless you have a belief behind the building, a belief in its identity and in the way of life of man.
—Louis Kahn

It has often been observed that in our secular, democratic age, the art museum has emerged as the symbolic building type *par excellence*, replacing the statehouse, palace, and cathedral as a prime repository of architectural ambition and prestige. Whatever hesitations one may ultimately have harbored about this development—moral hesitations, in part, about inappropriately exalting aesthetic experience at the expense of other values—there was certainly nothing mysterious about it. One did not have to be Matthew Arnold to grasp that religion (whatever private vitality it retained for believing individuals) had to a great extent lost its binding social force. Living in “the aftermath of the absolute,” to borrow André Malraux’s felicitous phrase from *The Voices of Silence*, one could easily have predicted that art and the whole realm of “creative” cultural endeavor would more and more step in as an important source of spiritual consolation. And one could also have predicted that architecture would follow suit, lavishing great attention on building the edifying structures in which ever greater crowds congregated to pay obeisance to their new-found cultural talisman.

The real shock is how vitiated it all seems today: the art, the architecture, the

redemptive cultural experience that they once promised or at least presupposed. It is not, or not quite—not yet—that culture, too, has irretrievably lost the elasticity and seriousness that made it, for many, a grateful compensation for spiritual losses suffered elsewhere. Rather, it is that the dazzling proliferation (one hesitates to call it success) of the art world has had an immeasurably coarsening effect on public culture at every level, from the most refined and elevated to the frankly quotidian. Forget about the Mapplethorpes and Serranos of the world: their main interest is as exotic, perhaps depraved, curiosities; and the chief question their notoriety inspires is what it says about our culture that they should have come to occupy so central a place in the discussion in the first place.

The more persistent issue concerns the direction of high culture and the institutions that support it. Where in this age of media infatuation are they heading? In recent decades, few institutions have been more accurate barometers of shifting cultural tastes and anxieties than our art museums. The extraordinary growth of museums across the country has raised in the most immediate way possible questions about the role of the museum as cultural custodian, educational institution, arbiter of connoisseurship and artistic quality.

On the one hand, the widespread ethos demanding a museum for every town, village, and hamlet—as well as exhibitions of

every conceivable scrap of cultural trivia—has done much to dilute the art museum's traditional concentration on preserving and exhibiting objects of the highest artistic achievement. On the other hand, a feverish art market has helped to transform the contemporary art world—including much in the contemporary museum world—into a sordid cultural free-for-all obsessed with “trends” and reputations. The circus architecture proposed by Michael Graves a few years ago for the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York is only one of the most publicized architectural fiascoes threatening the museum world. Worse—because actually built—are the many aggressively undistinguished additions Kevin Roche has purveyed to the Metropolitan Museum to house their collections of contemporary art, the preposterous tower Gwathmey, Siegel is constructing to disfigure the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the meretricious museum buildings churned out by other fashionable architects like James Stirling, Robert Venturi, and Charles Moore.

In this context, it is useful to remind ourselves that the current situation is not, as it were, an inviolable state of nature, and that there are genuine architectural alternatives to the promiscuous chaos we are faced with today. As is often the case, a good start for anyone wishing to plot a course into the future is a glance at the lessons of the past. In the annals of recent museum architecture, there is no more rigorous and compelling example at odds with current trends than the twentieth-century American modernist Louis Kahn (1901-1974). A current traveling exhibition that examines Kahn's museums provides a good opportunity to review his accomplishments in this realm. Organized at the Duke University Museum of Art, “The Art Museums of Louis I. Kahn”¹ includes over one hundred sketches, models, ground plans, elevations, presentation drawings, and so on for Kahn's three completed museums as well as preliminary drawings that he did for the de Menil Museum project in Houston, Texas.

While Kahn also is well known for other buildings—the Richards Medical Research Building at the University of Pennsylvania, for example, or the Salk Institute Laboratories in La Jolla, California—he is probably most acclaimed for his museums. In fact, museums bracket his mature career. The Yale University Art Gallery (1951-53) was his first major commission, while the Kimbell Art Museum (1966-72)—which most observers regard as his architectural masterpiece—was the last building he completed. Though under construction when he died, the Yale Center for British Art (1972-77), like all Kahn's buildings, was still in a process of design evolution and had to be completed by other architects.

As Patricia Cummings Loud points out in her detailed catalogue essay,² the story of Kahn's career is a tale of the triumph of talent and perseverance over adversity, a classic instance of the American Dream come true.

1 “The Art Museums of Louis I. Kahn” opened at the Duke University Museum of Art in Durham, North Carolina, last fall. It traveled to the Yale University Art Gallery this winter, and then went to the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, where it is on view until June 17. The exhibition concludes its tour at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where it may be seen from July 19 through September 16, 1990. The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue of the same title written by the guest curator, Patricia Cummings Loud (Duke University Press, 304 pages, \$60; \$30 paper).

2 Detail is Mrs. Loud's forte. She seems to have inspected every bill of lading and memorandum connected with the projects she discusses, and she does not hesitate to share them all with the reader as she moves from “Commission Background” through “Evaluation of Completed Building” for each project. An employee of the Kimbell, Mrs. Loud has burrowed even deeper into the minutiae surrounding the history, construction, and design of that museum in a long essay on its architecture that appears in *In Pursuit of Quality: The Kimbell Art Museum: An Illustrated History of the Art and Architecture*, which was published by the Kimbell in association with Abrams in 1987.

Louis Isadore Kahn was born on a small island off the coast of Estonia to poor, but literate, Jewish parents. When he was three, he suffered a horrible accident that disfigured him for life. Attracted by the colorful glittering of burning coals, the young boy reached into the fire and pulled some coals onto his apron. They immediately burst into flames, burning and irreparably scarring his hands and face. According to Mrs. Loud, his mother took the accident as a sign that her son had been "touched by destiny" and subsequently singled him out for special nurture and support.

The Kahns immigrated to the United States in 1906, settling near relatives in Philadelphia, the city that would be home for Louis for the rest of his life. Some two years after arriving, Kahn's father, Leopold, sustained a serious back injury that put an end to his employment as a laborer. The family subsisted largely on the meager wages Kahn's mother earned by her sewing and needlepoint. Despite their straitened circumstances, Kahn's talent as a draftsman was recognized early and encouraged. One story has it that a drawing of a steamship that the five-year-old Louis did while crossing the Atlantic with his mother and siblings won him a box of oranges from the ship's captain.

In high school, Kahn took a course in architectural history that decided him on his vocation. He went to the University of Pennsylvania to study architecture, and was there steeped in the Beaux-Arts tradition under Paul Cret. He completed his training in 1924 and, after working a few years as a draftsman and apprentice designer, managed to save enough money to embark on a yearlong tour of Europe. Returning to Philadelphia in 1929, he went to work for Cret, but the Depression soon put him out of work. The Thirties and early Forties were, Mrs. Loud notes, "lean years" for the architect. He worked with several firms, mostly on housing projects and designs for private houses. Finally, in 1951, his moment came: he was asked to take over as architect for the Yale University Art Gallery after Philip Goodwin (co-architect of the

Museum of Modern Art) had to withdraw from the commission because of health problems.

Kahn's strikingly original design for the Yale Art Gallery—exceptionally pristine yet still warm and inviting—established his national reputation. By the early Sixties he had become something of a legend among architects. His gnomic utterances and questions—"All matter is spent light," "What does an arch want to be?"—helped make him a kind of guru among his students at Yale in the late Forties and Fifties, while the craftsmanship, clarity of design, and humane proportions of his best buildings won him a wide critical following.

Unfortunately, though, Kahn's contributions to architecture are more often admired than emulated. In an age when postmodern pomposity seems to have triumphed everywhere, he stands as a rare example of modernist probity. Indeed, while Kahn came firmly out of the Beaux-Arts tradition, in his maturity he emerged as a foremost American modernist, perhaps *the* foremost American modernist of the Fifties and Sixties. Like all the great modernists, he did not reject architectural history or tradition, but adapted both to contemporary needs and what he liked to call "availabilities." The vaulted galleries of the Kimbell, for example, are perfectly traditional in conception yet superbly contemporary in execution and feeling. "Tradition," Kahn noted, "gives you the powers of anticipation from which you know what will last when you create." Today, when "modernism" has become a term of opprobrium for many critics, Kahn is often not identified as a modernist. It is true that his buildings do not look like those of Corbusier or Mies. But few architects are closer to the spirit of those modernist masters in their attention to detail, rejection of applied ornamentation, and delight in the aesthetic potential of contemporary building materials and engineering techniques. What other architect has managed to imbue cast concrete with such dignity and even sumptuousness?

In this sense, Mrs. Loud is right to insist

that “Kahn accepted the premises of the International Style.” Though his buildings are not the glass boxes we tend (too narrowly) to associate with the term, they do display a commitment to structural honesty that is a hallmark of high modernism. “The artist,” Kahn wrote, “instinctively keeps the marks which reveal how a thing is done.” As Mrs. Loud explains,

In Kahn’s works materials are handled not just straightforwardly but with a sense of the worth of their own properties and qualities. Kahn’s concept of the adornment of a building dealt with structure and construction, with the joint as the beginning of ornament, as he often said. Thus we will find separation, even declaration, of parts of the building; we will find concrete handled so that it is marked by the means of its forming.

One of the chief merits of all Kahn’s museums—what makes each of them an architectural success in the the fullest sense—is the happy marriage of architectural individuality and what we might call architectural invisibility. There are certainly many quirkier contemporary buildings than

Kahn’s—architecture in the Seventies and Eighties has been virtually defined by quirkiness—but few perhaps that are genuinely more distinctive architectural creations. The post-tensioned barrel vaults of the Kimbell, the tetrahedral slab ceiling of the Yale Art Gallery, the cylindrical stairwells of the Yale Art Gallery and Center for British Art: these are signature architectural innovations that helped make these buildings the memorable works that they are. But it is part of Kahn’s genius that these distinctive elements never intrude upon the viewer’s attention.

Kahn’s museums are individual to the point of idiosyncrasy, yet they remain transparent to the works of art they house. The beautiful contrast of unfinished blond oak against the cool, smokiness of pre-cast concrete: this is certainly part of what one takes away from a visit to the British Art Center. But while one looks at the works of art there, the building exists only as a serene and reticent presence. Louis Kahn was in the habit of asking, “What does a building want to be?” Among his greatest gifts were the patience to listen and the wit to discern the answer.

Robert Moskowitz at MOMA

by *Eric Gibson*

Robert Moskowitz may not be the most important artist ever to have been given a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, but in certain ways he's among the most interesting. His paintings of emblematic images—lighthouses and skyscrapers, for example—isolated on flat, neutral grounds don't offer the viewer much to look at, and in a fundamental way they are far too narrowly based to amount to any kind of major pictorial statement. A mural-scale exercise in figure-ground relationships is all we get in his weaker pictures.

Yet his paintings are noteworthy for what they say about some of the problems—dilemmas, even—faced by abstract painters in recent years. Also, they raise questions about just what the recognizable images that have made their way back into painting are supposed to mean, or, rather, whence their meaning should come. Both of these questions carry far beyond the individual artist and illuminate much of the artistic activity of the last two or three decades. For this reason, Moskowitz came across in his retrospective as one of those curious figures whose work is more interesting for the light it sheds on its time than for any experience provided by its forms alone.

“Robert Moskowitz” was organized by Ned Rifkin, Chief Curator for Exhibitions at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., where it opened about a year ago.¹ It contained some sixty works covering all the

major phases of the artist's career, from the early paintings in which—partly under the influence of such artists as Rauschenberg and Johns—Moskowitz attached objects to his canvases, through the close-valued interiors of the corner of a room, to the work of the last fifteen years—the paintings for which he is best known—in which abstract and representational tendencies co-exist.

Abstract art has never recovered the confidence in its own destiny that it lost at the end of the Fifties. When Pop Art and Frank Stella's pinstripe paintings appeared on the scene, they irrevocably undercut abstraction's idealism. Pop did so by its introduction of banal, commercialized, representational imagery and by the ironic stance it adopted in relation to both its subject and the creative act. With Stella, it was the journeyman aesthetic he espoused, in which a painting's content was reduced to the aggregate of its materials and craft procedures.

From then on, it became much more difficult—if not impossible—to aspire to the

1 “Robert Moskowitz” was on view at the Hirshhorn Museum from June 21 to September 17, 1989; at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art from October 20, 1989, to January 7, 1990; and at the Museum of Modern Art from February 10 to May 1, 1990. A catalogue, featuring an essay by Ned Rifkin and an interview with the artist by Linda Shearer, was published by the Hirshhorn Museum/Thames & Hudson (208 pages, \$50; \$25.95 paper).

kind of universality and timelessness of earlier abstraction without appearing corny and out of date, just as, at the same time, the inclusion of some vestige of the real world outside—or even within—the studio became almost *de rigueur*. Just as important, Pop and Stella re-opened the question of exactly what abstract art's true "subject" should be, what it should aspire to, and what it should mean.

For Moskowitz, who at fifty-five falls at the younger end of the second-generation New York School artists, the solution to this dilemma has been to fashion an aesthetic that might be called the Deadpan Sublime. In the paintings of the last twenty years, anyway (the work known from the Whitney Museum's 1978 "New Image Painting" exhibition and after), Moskowitz has seemed to mix elements of both the down-to-earth, everyday world of the Sixties artists and the earlier, more spiritual aesthetic of abstraction they repudiated.

For example, in an untitled Ad Reinhardt-esque black painting from the mid-Seventies, you have to allow your eyes a moment or two to adjust to it in order to see it not as an abstraction but as one of the corner interiors. Interfering with this process, and with the remarkable mood of contemplative emptiness the artist is able to engender with such an image—the perfect Zen picture, in a way—is the white outline of a duck's head floating about two-thirds of the way up the painting, an image whose oddness, not to mention sheer incongruity, summarily dispels any cultivated inwardness we might have experienced.

Then there is a whole class of diverse subjects that comes in for uniform treatment. Routinely appearing in Moskowitz's painting are images appropriated from other artists' work—landscapes, seascapes, and skyscrapers—the very subjects which for these earlier painters served as vehicles of spiritual release, and, in the case of certain early American modernists, as emblems of the sheer exhilaration and reach of the modern experience. (The work of some of these artists—including Caspar David Friedrich,

Georgia O'Keeffe, and Charles Sheeler—is illustrated in Ned Rifkin's catalogue essay.) Yet these images appear in Moskowitz's work utterly without inflection, seemingly devoid of emotional resonance, as though the artist wanted to tell us about them without letting us in on what they mean to him. Views are almost always head-on, the image is described with hard-edge rigor, and the brushwork is uniformly flat and even.

There's a reason for this approach, of course. Moskowitz, introducing recognizable imagery into painting at a time when, Pop Art aside, such a gesture was thought to risk compromising abstraction's "purity," felt compelled to do so in such a way as to avoid bringing any narrative association along with it. Moskowitz's solution was to integrate image and pictorial structure, indeed to make one a function of the other. Thus a painting of the World Trade Center's twin towers could almost be a straightforward geometric abstraction.

It is on the basis of this approach to painting that Moskowitz was included in the "New Image" show, and since then he has been perceived as an artist who would help unsettle pure abstraction, or, in Rifkin's phrase, would "pull apart abstraction and representation and then rejoin them."

But it is a mistake to see Moskowitz as an artist concerned only with nudging art out of some kind of rut, for there is a large part of his identity as an artist that is still committed to the old, pre-Pop values in painting. One would never impute to Moskowitz the same artistic impulses as a Mondrian or a Rothko, but still, there's a side of him that feels the powerful pull of that transcendent impulse. In fact, far from being an artist committed to expanding the language of abstraction, as the conventional wisdom has it, Moskowitz seems engaged in an opposite endeavor, namely to keep faith with the past, to find some way in which to accommodate the past to the changed realities of the present.

For one thing, although Moskowitz's imagery is unquestionably deadpan in its

impact upon the viewer, it is at the same time completely devoid of irony. This in itself is enough to ally him more closely with the earlier generation of painters than his own or any that followed, irony having become the only safe attitude for the majority of painters both of the Pop movement and of the Eighties.

Then there is the surprising, even quirky development of Moskowitz's work. Following a brief attachment to Abstract Expressionism (he had studied under Adolph Gottlieb at Pratt in the mid-Fifties), Moskowitz began his brief period of incorporating actual objects—window shades, paper bags, and manila envelopes—into his art. But he soon abandoned such constructions for the illusionistic “corner” paintings, thus repudiating the Rauschenberg-Johns-Minimalist view of art as being irrevocably part of the real world of things. (Even in his collage-paintings—his “window shades,” for example—he didn't go as far as he might have. Although he unequivocally asserted the reality of the window shade, he integrated it into his overall pictorial structure.)

Perhaps more important, however, is Moskowitz's relationship to older art. He often borrows from the image-bank of modernism, making use of Rodin's *The Thinker*, Brancusi's *Bird in Space*, the Empire State Building, and other readily recognizable icons. This in itself indicates a feeling of identity with the past. This isn't the ironic quotation of a David Salle, and it shows that, unlike many modern artists, he sees no need to define himself in opposition to the past.

But there's one work in the exhibition that suggests that, far from merely not repudiating his ancestors, Moskowitz readily identifies with them and the aesthetic ambitions they had in common. This is the 1981 *Red Mill*, a large red-pastel drawing of a red windmill, and the one truly beautiful work he has ever made. It is, of course, a reference to Mondrian's pre-abstract windmill paintings. This overt homage to an earlier master, together with the unusual worm's-eye view of the mill (implying supplication

or awe) and the deep red glow of the mill itself, conveys a feeling of exhilaration and spiritual uplift that was the norm in an earlier era of abstract art, an era with which Moskowitz is clearly demonstrating an affinity.

Far from simply wishing to extend abstraction, Moskowitz, from the very outset of his career, has attempted to combine an idealistic view of abstract art with the decidedly more down-to-earth view that characterizes post-Pop abstract painting. The trouble with the way he has chosen to try to effect this accommodation is that too often his pared-back imagery is simply banal. As architecture the World Trade Center is pretty uninspiring; as an artist's subject it has just as little to offer. And when the imagery fails to carry any emotional weight, the paintings reduce to superficial visual puns, as for example when we fleetingly read the paintings of Rodin's *The Thinker* as straightforward abstractions before the identity of their subject registers. At such times Moskowitz seems merely a kind of Donald Sultan *avant la lettre*.

But to criticize Moskowitz in this way is to see him as a latter-day formalist, a manipulator of language and painting with nothing to say. According to Rifkin and Moskowitz himself, however, this is not the case. His images do have meaning. The question is, though, is this meaning accessible to us?

The painting *Teapot* (1976) illustrates this dilemma. On a large, loosely brushed ochre ground, two teapots are silhouetted one above the other and some distance apart. They are bridged by the bright yellow ray that emanates from the upper pot. Rifkin quotes the artist as saying that this picture “is about people, about relationships . . . within yourself and relationships with another person. It is a very idealistic painting.”

No doubt it is for the artist. But the viewer is hard put to impute human qualities to an inanimate domestic object such as a teapot; in other words, to see in this image the ideas the artist may wish to convey. What Moskowitz's art speaks of is the shift from

symbolic imagery, in which the depicted object represents something actual in the world, to a more free-floating kind of imagery whose meaning derives not from some commonly held frame of reference but from a private one conceived by the artist and accessible to him alone. It's a legacy of the Conceptual Art movement of the Sixties, in which what counted wasn't the art object but the ideas that inspired it.

Eighties art saw the ascendance of this new attitude toward meaning. Jeff Koons's sculptures were kitsch, but there's a whole interpretive structure that's been erected around them to explain their importance, no part of which can be inferred from the work itself. Moskowitz may not himself have been responsible for this shift, but it is at its clearest in his work.

Moskowitz is one of the last of that final generation of painters who expected to follow a prescribed career in the art world. After art school, one would quickly find a studio, then a gallery. Soon after, the first articles would appear in the art magazines, followed by the Abrams monograph and, no later than one's fiftieth birthday, the in-

evitable retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Such expectations, which began to diminish in the Sixties, wholly dissolved in the Eighties: come that decade, one didn't even have to go to art school to wind up at Mary Boone, and MOMA was no longer the sole agency for certifying an artist's "arrival."

Moskowitz learned this hard lesson early on. Despite an early show at Castelli in 1962, he was rapidly displaced by the emergent Pop artists who came to populate that gallery, and he didn't really resurface as a presence until the "New Image" show more than fifteen years later. Then, once again, he all but dropped out of sight.

A MOMA retrospective once signified the ascension of an artist to the rank of modernist master. But times have changed, and with them, unfortunately, the art world's idea of what constitutes artistic achievement. "Robert Moskowitz" reminded one less of the ritual coronations of MOMA's not-too-distant past than the pinning on of a modest medal, a commendation to one who, like MOMA itself, has faithfully borne the modernist standard in the face of decades of dissension within the ranks.

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish during July or August. Our next issue will appear in September.

Finessing the Five of Hearts

by James W. Tuttleton

The circle of intimates whose lives are recounted in Patricia O'Toole's *The Five of Hearts: An Intimate Portrait of Henry Adams and His Friends, 1880-1918*¹ includes Adams and his wife Marian (familiarily known as "Clover"); John Hay, Secretary of State, and his wife Clara, who were central to the political and social life of Washington in the late nineteenth century; and Clarence King, the geologist who knew all about gold and silver mines, charted the Fortieth Parallel, and wrote a very popular account of the West called *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872). Miss O'Toole offers here "a portrait of an elite" who in their public life "helped to define American culture and politics in the years between the Civil War and World War I." But she also provides an intimate, personal "group biography" of a set whose story was one of "abounding love, the riches of friendship, tenderness, loyalties verging on passion, generosity," as well as "a story of secrets, loneliness, betrayal, madness, and suicide."

The public lives of these figures are reasonably well known. Henry Adams, born into a family of presidents and politicians, served his father as secretary in the legation in London during the Civil War, aspired to a career in journalism, edited *The North American Review*, and taught history at

Harvard. He and Clover were married in 1872, moved to a princely house on Lafayette Square in Washington, and established a salon unequaled in Washington for its high style and scintillating political talk. "I gravitate to a capital by a primary law of nature," Adams wrote an English correspondent. "This is the only place in America where society amuses me, or where life offers variety." In Washington Adams composed the anonymously published novel *Democracy* (1880) and, under the pseudonym Frances Snow Compton, *Esther* (1884), a study of his wife's religious conflicts. He likewise composed a massive, little-read history of the administrations of Jefferson and Madison, and *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (1904) and *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), on which his fame as a writer principally rests.

Though he was prepared by every consideration of birth and education to be president, Adams lacked popular appeal, was offended by the advancement of lesser men, and concluded that power was "a diseased appetite, like a passion for drink or perverted tastes"; it produced "an aggravation of self, a sort of tumor that ends by killing the victim's sympathies." As he watched the Washington political scene, Adams concluded that any young man who went into politics was the worse for it: "They all try to be honest, and then are tripped up by the dishonest; or they try to be dishonest (i.e., practical politicians) and degrade their own

1 *The Five of Hearts: An Intimate Portrait of Henry Adams and His Friends, 1880-1918*, by Patricia O'Toole; Clarkson N. Potter, 459 pages, \$25.

natures." In 1899 he told Elizabeth Cameron that "I've managed to drag on degraded existence for the last thirty years without an office or an honor to my family-back, as far as I can see, all the better for freedom." However, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes had a different opinion of Adams's relation to power: Adams wanted it, all right, but he "wanted it handed to him on a silver platter." In any case, Adams was forced to be content to sit on the sidelines, watching and criticizing the political system while others, like John Hay, controlled the levers of power.

Meanwhile, Clover filled their palatial home with beautiful porcelains, oriental rugs, silver antiques, Japanese bronzes, and paintings by the Old Masters. And there, on Lafayette Square, she oversaw a social life that included senators and representatives, artists and intellectuals, and the socially elite. Washington social life thought well of itself in this era, but a *New York Times* correspondent of the day remarked that "more uneducated, rude, and vulgar men and women find their way into the social gatherings of the capital than to those of any other city in the Union." The Adamses, whose exclusiveness was legendary, were inclined to agree and tired of the social procession. "The universe," Henry Adams remarked, "hitherto has existed in order to produce a dozen people to amuse the five of hearts. Among us we know all mankind. We or our friends have canvassed creation, and there are but a dozen or two companions in it;—men and women, I mean, whom you like to have about you, and whose society is an active pleasure." In "Pandora," Henry James wrote a story in which his central character, modeled on Henry Adams, says to his wife, "Hang it, let us be vulgar and have some fun—let us invite the President." The characterization of their attitude was not an exaggeration.

John Hay was also a man of letters. As Lincoln's assistant secretary, the young Hay had been in a position to see Oval Office decisions during the Civil War, and out of this experience came his co-authored ten-

volume *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (1890). Popular with the public for his *Castilian Days* (1871) and *Pike County Ballads* (1871), Hay also published an anonymous novel about the struggle between capital and labor, *The Bread-Winners*, in 1884. Appointed Assistant Secretary of State by President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1880, the immensely wealthy Hays moved in next door to the Adamses. Afterward he was McKinley's ambassador to Great Britain and Secretary of State under McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. At the State Department he designed the Open-Door policy in China and the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty that gave the United States control over the Panama Canal. Given the theme and the anonymity of *Democracy*, many readers thought Hay to be its author; and for identical reasons people often guessed that Adams was the author of *The Bread-Winners*.

Clarence King (1842-1901) was an odd addition to this circle of intimates. A hard-driving geologist who loved nothing more than horseback riding and tenting around the campfire in the West, King had worked the mines of the Comstock Lode, engaged in the survey of the Cordilleran ranges from the Rockies to California, and contributed centrally to the *Report of the Geological Explorations of the Fortieth Parallel* (1870-80). Miss O'Toole remarks that "the geologist's hammer was the key to El Dorado in nineteenth-century America—the only scientific means of unlocking the earth's treasure chests of gold, silver, copper, iron, and coal." King had the scientific savvy. Known as the "King of Diamonds" for exposing a scam involving a "salted" field of diamonds, he was in constant demand as a consultant as to the location and worth of lodes of precious minerals. No less the snob than his friends, he wanted it engraved upon his tombstone that "I am to the last fibre aristocratic in my belief, that I think the only fine thing to do with the masses is to govern and educate them into some semblance of their social superiors." With these superiors he hobnobbed at Lafayette Square and at his

clubs, the Century and the Knickerbocker in New York. But although he had brilliant gifts in the field, King was an improvident speculator and, living in too grand a style, he died penniless. From his nickname, the group came to call themselves "The Five of Hearts"; they printed customized stationery with an embossed five of hearts, and corresponded with each other until their deaths.

The other four friends leagued to find Clarence King a wife, even setting him up with the novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson, who, according to Hay, "loved him at sight and talk[ed] of nothing else." But King declined the gambit: ladies of their exalted social class failed to excite him. And when hostesses in New York also tried to make a match, King would like as not remark:

The New York girl is certainly a phenomenon. What she would doubtless call her mind is a mere crazy quilt of bright odds and ends. Bits of second-hand opinion cut bias, snips of polite error patched in with remnants of truth which don't show the whole pattern, little rags of scandal &c &c all deftly sewed together in a pretty chromatic chaos well calculated to please a congenital dude but fatiguing to a lover of natural women, such as I am.

King described himself as having a "pessimistic hate of civilization," which seemed odd for a member of the Century Club, but it took the form of a detestation of the effect, on young women of his class, of Anglo-American sexual mores in the Victorian Era. Praising a "grandly barbaric Congo woman" who had come to work in his mother's Newport house, King told Hay that

Civilization so narrows the gamut! Respectability lets the human pendulum swing over such a pitiful little arc that it is worthwhile now and again to see human beings whose feelings have no inflexible bar of metal restraining their swing to the limits set by civilized experience and moral law.

Such views were hardly consonant with those of the Adamses and the Hays, but the confirmed bachelor was such a genial companion that his oddities of opinion were forgiven.

The public lives of King, the Hays, and the Adamses are familiar to most students of nineteenth-century social and literary history, and Miss O'Toole gives a responsible account of their standing with their contemporaries. But her real interest is the personal interrelations amongst them, for, in their private lives, aspects of personality emerged that indeed make them equally as interesting as the Bloomsbury group or the Stein circle in Paris.

Miss O'Toole is especially illuminating about the marriage of the Adamses, which ended in Clover's suicide in 1885, by ingestion of the photographic chemical potassium cyanide. In *The Education*, Adams could not bring himself to mention his wife and leaves void a twenty-year period touching the time of their marriage. For decades afterward, he forbade any mention in his presence of Clover's name, much less her death, and grieved in private. The gravesite sculpture at Rock Creek Cemetery called "The Peace of God," which Adams commissioned of Augustus Saint-Gaudens, was virtually his only comment on what Clover had meant to him in life and death.

In Miss O'Toole's portrait, Clover appears as a quick, intelligent, witty, sardonic personality who loved and was loved by Adams with a roughness, tenderness, and solicitude that are indeed touching. She was by all accounts a learned woman, but also an acerbic and biting personality not always trusted by Washington matrons. If John Hay liked Henry James's novels, Clover declared that "James's trouble was not that he bit off more than he could chew but that 'he chaws more than he bites off.'" Dismissing *The Portrait of a Lady*, she said "I'm ageing fast and prefer what Sir Walter [Scott] called the 'big bow-wow style.'" James called her a "Voltaire in petticoats," and noted that when he appeared in Washington society, the

Adamses were avid for gossip: "they mobbed me for revelations; and after I had dined with Blaine, to meet the president [Chester A. Arthur], they fairly hung on my lips." Watching from her Lafayette Square window on Sundays, Clover wrote of the heavyset Arthur: "There goes our chuckle-headed sovereign on his way from church! He doesn't look as if he fed only on spiritual food." Her view of the American sculptor in Rome, William Wetmore Story, was "Oh! how he does spoil nice blocks of white marble." And observing that the retiring Clara Hay "never speaks," said that it was just as well, since Mr. Hay "chats for two."

Henry's brother Charles Adams had opposed the Adamses' engagement, bursting out at the news, "Heavens!—no—they're all crazy as coots. She'll kill herself, just like her aunt!" And indeed, there was mental illness in the family. Henry Adams was fully aware of it, as well as of Clover's unnaturally close bond with her father. And when her father died, Clover had no reserve of spiritual or psychological strength to withstand the depression that drove her to suicide. After her death, Henry said that "The world seems to me to have suddenly changed, and to have left me an old man, pretty well stranded and very indifferent to situations which another generation must deal with . . . I have been thrown out of the procession, and can't catch up again."

Hay, a Midwesterner by birth, was raised to high political position thanks to his intimacy with Lincoln and his readiness to serve the G.O.P. Marriage to Clara Stone's millions did not diminish his stature with government figures and the social elite of Washington and London. Henry Adams was to say in *The Education* that one of the lessons of politics is that "a friend in power is a friend lost," but Hay's political eminence did not prevent him from continuously seeking the counsel of Adams, a fact which Theodore Roosevelt resented bitterly in his Secretary of State. The role John Hay played on the international political scene was not lost on him, and readers will find him a source of wit and laughter equal to Henry Adams in

every respect. Even so, as Hay grew older and became increasingly more refined and conservative, political life in Washington became a source of continuous abrasion, and he suffered odd, undiagnosable illnesses. About politics, he told President Garfield that "The constant contact with envy, meanness, ignorance, and the swinish selfishness which ignorance breeds, needs a stronger heart and a more obedient nervous system than I can boast of." Still, he served his government when the call came.

Clara Hay was by all accounts a dutiful wife who served the ambassador and secretary, and their many children, with exemplary, if unintellectual, devotion. While it is clear that John Hay loved her very much, she did not satisfy his every need, with the effect that in 1887 he fell in love with Nannie Lodge, the beautiful wife of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. Their affair was conducted by indirections so circumspect, in the gossipy Washington society of the time, that their usually "thwarted assignations" could only have caused them both continual frustration. If Clara knew about the affair, she wisely kept quiet about it and held her family together.

Meanwhile, the group teased each other about the anonymous novels that had been publicly ascribed to one or another of them. Some thought that Adams had written Hay's *The Bread-Winners*, others that Hay had written *Democracy*. Some thought King the author. For a while, none of them knew which of his friends had written these books. Making a game of the mystification, Hay announced that Adams must have written *The Bread-Winners*, and he told Adams, "To think that while Mrs. Hay and I, and Mrs. Don Cameron, sat guilelessly by your fire-side and bragged about Cleveland, you were taking down our artless prattle for the use of future satire—it is too much, 75 percent too much." Constance Fenimore Woolson thought that Hay and King had co-authored *Democracy* so as to make it possible for each individually to deny that *he* had written the book. In London, Hay met a woman who delighted him by announcing that *Democracy*

and *The Bread-Winners* were the only American novels worth reading. "I tried to make her believe I wrote them, but it was n.g." On a trip to Cuba with Adams, King told Hay that they had discovered in their rented house "your detestable and ribald novel Democracy." And in London in 1887, Hay told Adams that he had bought a number of drawings by the Old Masters and had spent "the last cent I got for 'Democracy' in minerals for Mrs. Hay." Who had written which novel was great fun for all of them, while the anonymity lasted, except for King, who was so put off by Adams's satire on venality in American politics that he vowed to write a novel called *Monarchy* or perhaps *Aristocracy* to show that political life was worse in London.

In the fall of 1881, Clover and Henry Adams had made the acquaintance of Elizabeth Sherman Cameron, a tall, beautiful girl of twenty-four unhappily married to the alcoholic Senator J. Donald Cameron of Pennsylvania. After Clover's death, Adams and Lizzie Cameron turned to each other for consolation and, though he was nearly twice her age, thus commenced a relationship that eventually set tongues wagging in Washington and Boston. Miss O'Toole remarks that "What had begun as infatuation had ripened, with her encouragement, into a deep, vexing love. Lizzie did not consider divorce an option, and she and Henry seem to have agreed not to have a sexual relationship."

Whatever the pleasures of their relationship, and they were many, Adams was clearly frustrated and managed matters by taking off for other parts of the world. In 1890 he embarked on a trip to Polynesia with the painter John LaFarge. Ostensibly Adams was after anthropological lore, and indeed he did write the *Memoirs of Marau Taaroa, Last Queen of Tahiti* (1893), but the expedition was meant to provide distraction from his personal unhappiness. Promised by King that he would find the lascivious island beauties available and willing, Adams and LaFarge clad themselves in the native loin-

cloth, but he complained to Lizzie that he was left unaroused by the comely nakedness he had encountered and neither of them had been propositioned yet. Later, in Japan, he and LaFarge engaged geishas, but Adams opined that sex in the Orient did not exist "except as a scientific classification." He told Hay that "I am lost in astonishment at this flower of eastern culture . . . Absolutely the women's joints clacked audibly, and their voices were metallic." None of them was the cultivated Lizzie Cameron. Back in the United States, Clarence King was not disappointed at the indifference of Adams and LaFarge to the beautiful women of Polynesia and the Orient: "I love primal woman so madly that I should have acted with jealousy had they discerned her." So Adams came back to Lafayette Square to a lifetime of nearly always chaperoned contacts with Mrs. Cameron.

Miss O'Toole reads Henry Adams's celebration of the Virgin Mary, in *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* and *The Education*, as a sublimation of Adams's longing for Lizzie Cameron:

In the Virgin of the French Middle Ages he found the ideal that allowed him to transform his ungratified love into worship and to create a role for himself that was less demeaning than "tame cat" [as Chateaubriand had called himself to his friend Madame Recamier, who had once been his lover]. Mrs. Cameron would be his goddess, he would be her votary. It was a noble resolution of a conflict that had tormented them both, since it seemed to settle, once and for all, the question of sex.

Resolution or not, Henry James was to say of their affair that it was "one of the longest and oddest American *liaisons* I've ever known. Women have been hanged for less—and yet men have been too, I judge, rewarded with more."

Yet the oddest relationship of any of the Five of Hearts involved Clarence King. Miners in the West had noticed that King would often enough disappear from camp to talk to

Indian women in the settlements. And in London, while on business ventures, his open talk in the gentlemen's clubs caused gossip to arise. Frank Mason, an American diplomat in London, described King's shenanigans. King, he told John Hay,

goes down to the lowest dive at Seven Dials, chirps to the pretty bar maid of a thieves' gin mill, gives her a guinea for a glass of "bittah," gets the frail simple thing clean gone on him. Then whips out his notebook and with a smile that would charm a duchess asks her to tell her story. Naturally she is pleased and fires away in dialect that never saw print which the wily ex-geologist nails on the spot. Of course she is a poor pitiful wronged thing who would have been an angel if she had been kindly treated and taken to Sunday school when she was a child.—They are all so, you know. Think, Hay, of ten such girls, with their plump red cheeks, their picturesque slang . . . corralled in one book written for a good moral purpose . . . I suppose, rather let us say we *hope*, that King is walking through all these narrow, slippery places upright and unstained as an archangel.

According to Miss O'Toole, King was no archangel. It is her theory that "he frequented such places because he could not feel sexually attracted to women unless they were, by nineteenth-century bourgeois standards, his social inferiors. Dark skins aroused him, as did servants, laborers, and prostitutes."

Even more bizarre, King in 1887, at the age of forty-five, commenced a romance in New York with a young black nursemaid of twenty-six named Ada Copeland. A seemingly wealthy white man twice her age, he persuaded her to marry him in a ceremony that observed every rite of the sacrament except the marriage license, which could not be obtained because of the law against miscegenation. None of his friends in Washington knew about this relationship. Yet, during the fourteen years of their marriage, in which this primal woman bore him five children, King never told Ada his real name. He had introduced himself as one

James Todd, and he accounted to her for his frequent absences, on trips to Washington and the West, by saying that he was a railroad porter from Baltimore. To his friends in Washington he explained his absences in New York, to be with Ada, as caused by mining trips or illness.

King persuaded Ada to keep their marriage a secret by telling her that he stood to lose a sizable inheritance if the marriage were disclosed:

The most important thing to us of all others is that the property which will one day come to me shall not be torn away from us by some foolish, idle person talking about us and some word getting to my old aunt. For the sake of your darling babies we must keep this secret of our love and our lives from the world.

He installed her in a large house in Brooklyn, complete with nurse, cook, laundress, and gardener. That King loved Ada deeply cannot be doubted; his feeling for her is instanced by this letter written during one of his mining trips to the West:

I cannot tell you how delighted I was to see your handwriting again. To see something you had touched was almost like feeling the warmth of your hand. My darling, tell me all about yourself. I can see your dear face every night when I lay my head on the pillow and my prayers go up to Heaven for you and the little ones. I feel most lonely and miss you most when I put out the light at night and turn away from the work of the day. Then I sit by my window in the starlight and look up at the dark night sky and think of you. Lonely seems my bed! Lonely is my pillow! I think of you and dream of you and my first waking thought is of your dear face and your loving heart.

But the pressures of leading this double life, and supporting two families (he was responsible also for his mother's establishment in Newport), took its toll on King. At one point he had a nervous breakdown and was institutionalized briefly in the Bloomingdale Asylum. Shortly before his death

King revealed to Ada his real identity; he reaffirmed their marriage, told her to call herself thenceforth Ada King, and made arrangements to bequeath to her and their children the substantial sum of eighty thousand dollars. But, unfortunately, his investments had been disastrous; he owed immense sums of money to John Hay and others. And when the will was probated, King's lawyer James Gardiner sold off his assets to satisfy the creditors. Ada was legally dismissed with a meager sum of sixty-five dollars a month. When she asked where this money came from, Gardiner told her that its source was an anonymous benefactor.

The surviving members of the Five of Hearts, now just Henry Adams and the Hays, were stunned by the revelation of King's secret life, as they had been stunned by Clover Adams's suicidal death. They had known each other so well, or so they thought, but as Miss O'Toole has so engagingly shown, the most intimate of relationships is never quite that rapturous fusion of personalities acclaimed in the nineteenth-century cult of friendship. Years later, in 1933, Ada King, seeking a portion of her inheritance, sued the estate of her husband's lawyer. She lost out in the courts, but learned at last the identity of the benefactor who had for thirty years supported her and King's children. It was of course John Hay, who had died in 1905.

Inspired illustrator

Roxana Robinson Georgia O'Keeffe:
A Life. Harper & Row, 639 pages, \$25

Doris Bry and Nicholas Callaway, editors
Georgia O'Keeffe: In the West.
Callaway Editions/Knopf,
unpaginated, \$100

reviewed by Deborah Solomon

Toward the end of her life, Georgia O'Keeffe was visited in New Mexico by Gloria Steinem, who showed up at her door

with a bouquet of roses. The artist refused to see her. She had no intention of endorsing the ideals of the women's movement, though that didn't keep the women's movement from endorsing her. With the rise of feminism in the Sixties, O'Keeffe's famously self-reliant life was held up as an exemplar of liberated behavior; her reputation, which had fallen off during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, suddenly began to climb. Since her death in 1986, at the age of ninety-eight, the artist has become more celebrated than ever. Currently, she's the subject of a new biography that runs more than six hundred pages, as well as a five-pound monograph (not to mention a 1990 calendar and appointment book published by Knopf). If O'Keeffe has become a virtual folk hero, it's not just because she's seen as a prototype of the "new" independent woman. It's also because her art is easy. She's the Norman Rockwell of the modern movement, a painter who's a household name and whose close-up views of flowers, rocks, and adobe churches offer a cartoon version not only of America but of art itself.

When did I start having doubts about O'Keeffe? Growing up, I was as entranced as anyone by the notion of this proud, eccentric woman who was married to a famous photographer yet preferred to live by herself in the desert amid her collection of skulls and bones. If O'Keeffe led her life as a self-styled primitive, her work, too, seemed to spurn the values of civilization. The insistent simplicity of her shapes, the slow, whorling patterns of her compositions, the bright-as-a-sunset colors—it's as if she was consciously rejecting the speed and grayness of modern life. Which isn't to say that O'Keeffe wasn't a modern artist, but that she seemed to have fallen in with the modernists almost by accident. Her compositions could be aggressively abstract, yet somehow one never imagined her sitting down to think about what abstraction meant. Rather one pictured her wandering around desert canyons and noticing how ordinary objects can be charged with an unexpected intensity.

Yet this notion of O'Keeffe as a vision-

ary—which is to say, a first-rate artist—became impossible to sustain after seeing the retrospective of her work organized in 1987 by the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C. (The show made several stops, including the Metropolitan Museum in New York.) One left the exhibition believing that the artist was essentially an inspired illustrator, and that her inspiration derived not from nature, or from modern painting, but from the surfacey designs of photography. O’Keeffe’s entire approach to painting, I think, came out of the photography of the Twenties, a decade when advanced photographers were experimenting with close-up views in order to make their images look abstract. Her pictures of calla lilies and bursting poppies, with their dramatically enlarged petals, bear an unmistakable likeness to Imogen Cunningham’s floral portraits. In a more general way, her work resembles that of Paul Strand, with whom she was personally acquainted and whose huge close-ups of driftwood and plants may have alerted her to the way relatively small natural forms can be monumentalized by a change in scale.

It isn’t surprising that O’Keeffe would have been influenced by modernist photography; she was, after all, the wife of Alfred Stieglitz, who championed and exhibited much of the best photography of the period. Yet what is surprising is that she proclaimed herself a painter of “emotions” and “feelings”—of pure intuition—when in reality her work is based on a schematic and studied sense of design. Compared to other artists in the Stieglitz circle, such as Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, or even Stieglitz himself, O’Keeffe presents us with a brand of modernism that isn’t clouded over by the issues of art; it’s modernism reduced to decoration. Her images can look striking at first, yet like most art that comes out of design, the longer you look at them the less there is to see.

Why do people keep writing about Georgia O’Keeffe? The first reason is that she’s a

woman. That may be the second and third reason, too. Roxana Robinson’s *Georgia O’Keeffe*, a hefty new biography of the artist, is written from an overtly feminist perspective, which is to say it depicts O’Keeffe as a victim of male oppression. Much of the book is taken up with a melodramatic account of the artist’s marriage to Stieglitz, who was twenty-three years her senior and, we are told, an exorbitantly self-centered husband who, among other sins, liked to flirt and discouraged his wife from having children. Was O’Keeffe unhappily married? If so, she didn’t let on to friends. Yet that doesn’t prevent Robinson, a novelist by profession, from jumping to histrionic conclusions. She reports, for instance, that O’Keeffe’s marital “situation was trying,” that her “feelings were not treated by her husband with consideration,” that “if his behavior was destructive, hers was self-destructive,” that her “emotional landscape was excruciating.” O’Keeffe, by nature, was stubborn, practical, and relatively cheerful, yet reading this account of her life one would think she was another Sylvia Plath, a woman perpetually on the brink of suicide.

There were, to be sure, certain inequities in the O’Keeffe-Stieglitz marriage, yet it seems to me that it was Stieglitz, not his wife, who made most of the sacrifices. O’Keeffe wasn’t exactly an accommodating wife. She refused to cook, resented it when her husband’s relatives visited, and was constantly heading off to New Mexico. Yet Stieglitz was obviously a supportive husband. He exhibited his wife’s work, introduced her to the most advanced painters in New York, immortalized her face and long, graceful hands in a famous series of photographs. O’Keeffe enjoyed the attention he paid her. (“I don’t like to be second or third or fourth,” she wrote to the critic Henry McBride in 1923. “I like being first—if I’m noticed at all—that’s why I get on with Stieglitz—with him I feel first.”) Under his influence, her work matured. Her amateurish, pseudo-mystical compositions of the Teens, with their melting forms and feverish pinks and greens,

gave way in the Twenties to striking semi-abstractions that lean heavily on the work of artists she met through her husband, namely Arthur Dove and Paul Strand. It hardly needs saying that to characterize O'Keeffe as the victim of a "destructive" marriage, as Robinson does, is to substitute a feminist soap opera for the real version of events.

Despite her feminist leanings, Robinson backs off from the gender issue when the subject turns to O'Keeffe's work. She's aware that the artist's flower paintings, which were done in the Twenties, have been likened to the female anatomy, yet feels this reflects less on the artist than on lascivious-minded male critics who have projected their own fantasies onto the artist's work. O'Keeffe, of course, was loathe to have her paintings interpreted in sexual terms. Once when a filmmaker asked her about the voluptuous character of her flowers, she had the microphone turned off and said she wouldn't talk about "such rubbish." And who could blame her? It must have been upsetting to hear people reduce her life's work to a Freudian cliché. Still, it doesn't take a psychoanalyst to see that O'Keeffe's imagery, with its swelling forms and dark fissures, can be almost pornographic in its undisguised obsession with the female genitalia.

Indeed, it seems to me that one of the key tasks of any O'Keeffe biographer is to examine the schism between the overt sexuality of the artist's work and the ascetic quality of her life. The artist Peggy Bacon once described O'Keeffe as being "conspicuous as a nun," and it isn't hard to see why. She dressed in black, painted pictures of crosses, cloistered herself in the desert. She outlived her husband by four decades and reportedly was celibate the whole time. O'Keeffe's feelings for her art didn't leave her with much room for other attachments. It's almost as if she decided early on that being an artist required her to blot out the feminine side of her nature, or at least to keep it separate from the rest of her. Her art, too, is an exercise in compartmentalization. The elements in her paintings are separate and distinct; the forms are clearly bounded,

almost like cutouts, and fit inside their frames as neatly as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. If O'Keeffe early on adopted photography as an artistic model, it's because photographs appealed to something basic in her nature—a need for immaculate surfaces and for sharp, crisp outlines that keep everything in its place.

As O'Keeffe's life continues to provide grist for pop biographies (a new one is due out next year from Doubleday), her work, too, is giving rise to exceedingly commercial ventures. Such is the apparently unlimited appeal of the O'Keeffe legend that when Alfred A. Knopf decided some time ago to publish an overview of the artist's work, it decided it would publish not one book, but four! The first volume in the series, *Georgia O'Keeffe: One Hundred Flowers*, a jumbo-size monograph featuring floral portraits, was released three years ago. The second and latest installment, *Georgia O'Keeffe: In the West*, is also a deluxe coffee-table monograph. One way it differs from the traditional monograph is that instead of featuring a scholarly essay by a well-known art historian, *In the West* has been edited by two decidedly unscholarly folks—Doris Bry, who served as O'Keeffe's dealer in the Sixties, and Nicholas Callaway, a businessman who "packages" books and who sold Knopf the idea of the four-volume O'Keeffe series.

O'Keeffe was always attentive to how books and catalogues are designed, and *In the West*, like her own autobiography, is an elaborate production. It has large pages (13 x 16 inches), weighty paper, excellent low-gloss reproductions. Yet the publisher goes overboard in trying for a classy look. A strip of clear plastic imprinted with the book's title and wrapped around its covers is a pretentious touch. Far more irritating is that paintings are presented without accompanying captions. Titles and dates—essential to even a casual understanding of an artist's oeuvre—are treated here as gratuitous data, so much clutter on a well-designed page. The reader has to turn to a master list in the back of the book to get the missing information.

The book's rather extravagant format was intended, one supposes, as a reminder of the artist's high status. Yet the opulence of the presentation in the end only highlights the poverty of its contents. Aesthetically, O'Keeffe's Western period was a poverty-ridden time. When she left New York to visit Taos, New Mexico, in 1929, she was forty-one years old, and her most impressive achievements belonged to the past. During the Teens and the Twenties, she had found herself drawn to the new European approaches to art, and had come to understand how natural forms can be depicted as shapes and colors on a flat plane. By contrast, in the Thirties, the New Mexico years, her work hardened into a banal form of realism, as if she was losing touch with the impulses of the modern movement.

Some of the Southwestern pictures obviously are better than others. Leafing through *In the West*, one admires the looming black crosses, from 1929, which at once hark back to nineteenth-century transcendentalism, yet anticipate the what-you-see-is-what-you-see literalness of more recent art. But other works aren't nearly so captivating. O'Keeffe's depictions of the Ranchos Church, with their tan, rubbery-looking forms, come close to resembling a comic strip. Some people consider her floating animal skulls, from the mid-1930s, the height of spiritual grandeur, but to me they look like academic Surrealism transported to the desert. And then there are the seemingly endless pictures of glowing red hills, each, in its own way, as bland as a travel poster; her hills seem to say, "Come to New Mexico." The simplified vocabulary of O'Keeffe's early years later became merely simplistic.

O'Keeffe's decades in the Southwest were a time when her renown grew to spectacular proportions, but when the quality of her work fell off. Did fame corrupt her? I'd say yes. As O'Keeffe became a larger-than-life figure, she lost all capacity for self-criticism, and her work devolved into slickness. Living out west, what seemed to command her attention was not the romance of art so much as the romance of her own life. She liked

being a lady of the canyons, a renegade from the metropolis. She became so impressed by her own legend that she couldn't be bothered with other artists, and she broke off from the traditions that had spawned her and sustained her—traditions that touched on Kandinsky's spiritualism and Arthur Dove's mysticism and Paul Strand's magnified realism and that all related to the questing spirit of modernism. And, as O'Keeffe backed away from modernism, she backed away from everything that made her work interesting. It's been said by certain of O'Keeffe's admirers that it's sad, in a way, that her life has been sentimentalized, and that 99 percent of her audience now consists of people who don't have a serious interest in art. O'Keeffe has the audience she deserves.

One poet's prejudices

Donald Davie Under Briggflatts: A History of Poetry in Great Britain, 1960-1988. University of Chicago Press, 261 pages, \$24.95

reviewed by Robert Richman

Under Briggflatts is the sixteenth volume of criticism by the English poet and essayist Donald Davie. Although the book announces itself as a history of British poetry from 1960 to 1988, it is nothing of the sort. The dates are only loosely observed: essays on Basil Bunting (1900-1985), Edwin Muir (1887-1959), and Edward Thomas, who died in the First World War, jostle with articles on such contemporaries as Seamus Heaney, Philip Larkin, and C. H. Sisson. What's more, many inferior writers are discussed, sometimes at length, while poets more deserving of attention—Craig Raine and Andrew Motion, for example—go unmentioned. All in all, *Under Briggflatts* amply confirms Davie's reputation as one of our most eccentric critics.

Among the book's other oddities is Davie's inclination to assess poetry on the basis of its subject matter rather than on its

literary excellence. Take, for example, one of the essays on Basil Bunting, a minor British disciple of Ezra Pound. (The "Briggflatts" of Davie's book is a reference to Bunting's long poem of that title, which, in Davie's view, is a landmark of recent British poetry.) Davie, who has long been a champion of Pound and his followers, writes that "Bunting . . . would have us believe [that he] is like his American colleague George Oppen in wanting to make affirmations . . . only about things offered to his senses, and the patterns which such things make in his awareness of them."

In Davie's view, a similarly modest and self-effacing poetic sensibility distinguishes the work of C. H. Sisson. Here, too, however, it is Sisson's view of the material world that earns Davie's respect, not his poetry as such. What distinguishes Sisson's verse, in Davie's words, is "a condition of [poetic] perceptiveness free of egotism, such as the human perceiver cannot attain to, except momentarily." This description of Sisson's poetry is true enough. But should a critic's judgment hinge on a "condition of . . . perceptiveness free of egotism"?

Why, one may ask, does Davie focus on this "condition of . . . perceptiveness free of egotism" at the expense of the aesthetic merits of poetry? The answer is that it corresponds to Davie's own outlook. Indeed, one needn't read far into *Under Briggflatts* before realizing that the poets Davie praises are those who share his aesthetic attitude. This attitude might be described as an exacting deference to the "givenness" of the world. Whatever is *concrete* is to Davie's liking, not only because he admires palpable things but also because focusing on them helps keep at bay the poet's rampant subjective ego. In praising Vikram Seth's first book of poems, *The Humble Administrator's Garden*, Davie wrote: "the poet's eye is on what is objectively before him, rather than the intricacies of his own sensibility." This more or less sums up what Davie most desires of poets.

Davie desires other things too, of course, among them a sense of history and a commitment to politics. Among the poets who

satisfy these criteria is the radical Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid, whose "engagement with history," Davie writes, "is one of the things we expect of a great poet." Although he acknowledges the "duplicities" and "absurdities" of MacDiarmid's career—he was a Communist—Davie nonetheless thinks that "readers across the political spectrum" will agree that MacDiarmid has produced an important body of work. Davie also praises the work of Austin Clarke, whose poem "Forget Me Not," Davie writes, "is as insistently *in* historical time as [Edwin Muir's poem "The Horses"] is out of it . . . Clarke [unlike the "mythopoeic" Muir] trusts the local and contingent through thick and thin." Another poet singled out for praise in *Under Briggflatts* is Jeremy Hooker, for whom "'belonging', being a 'citizen', seems to matter more [to him as a poet] than uttering the truths he has in his keeping."

The reasons these poets earn Davie's regard have nothing to do with the *quality* of their writing. In MacDiarmid's case, it's his politics; in Clarke's case, his being "in" history; in Hooker's case, his being a citizen-poet. All three poets, of course, are further admired for their allegiance to the impersonal, "objective" outlook Davie favors.

The poets viewed with disfavor in *Under Briggflatts* are those who do not share Davie's aesthetic. Thus Geoffrey Hill is condemned for having "little patience . . . with the naïve reader." Hill is also disparaged for what Davie calls his "sumptuous indirections." Indirections, sumptuous or otherwise, are distrusted by a critic who relishes more straightforward passions, like politics. Hill, if we take Davie's word for it, believes that "it is not the business of poetry to argue us into, or out of, any position, [or] to have any such designs upon us." Since doubt is not a state of mind Davie wishes to cultivate, Hill's poems are dismissed for harboring it. Davie's procedure takes us a long way from criticism that has anything to do with aesthetic discrimination, of course: All he can do is gripe that Hill's view of the world does not conform to his own.

Given Davie's hostility to Hill, one would also expect him to disapprove of the poetry of Seamus Heaney. This poet's work, after all, bristles with equivocations about his responsibilities as a citizen of his Northern Ireland homeland—responsibilities that Davie considers paramount—as well as his responsibilities to art. And yet, Davie believes that Heaney's work is superior to Hill's. Heaney's equivocations, he writes, do not stem from an "aesthete's detachment"; rather, the Irish poet is said to recognize "the plausibility of this demand" to declare himself for one side or the other in his country's civil war. Heaney is thus more "self-accusing" (Davie's phrase) than Hill about his proclivity to lose himself in the raptures of an apolitical art.

Another oddity in Davie's criticism is his attitude toward Philip Larkin. He reproaches Larkin for having fostered an image of England as a citadel of philistinism:

Reading Larkin, his confederates and epigones [Davie writes], foreign observers have been persuaded that the British have comfortably opted out from twentieth-century endeavours in poetry; that British poetry has chosen to turn inwards, parochial, self-comforting and serviceable, content to address no public outside these tight little islands.

Davie condemns Larkin for his alleged view of England as a "parochial, self-comforting and serviceable" place. By devaluing the work of Larkin and Hill, perhaps the two finest English poets of their generation, Davie's criticism reaches a point of no return.

This scolding of Larkin is especially curious. Early in his career Davie was an acknowledged member of the so-called Movement, the literary group from which Larkin emerged as the recognized master. Davie's *The Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952), which extolled the didactic, socially oriented Augustans over the Romantics and Moderns, was seen as the Movement's critical manifesto. For some years now, however, Davie has been concerned to eradicate his connections with the Move-

ment aesthetic. In an article entitled "Remembering the Movement," from *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum* (1977), Davie reprimanded himself and his former associates for what he now considered their shameless provinciality. Davie felt the Movement poets were "deprecating" in their attempts to "woo and placate" a narrow-minded English audience. What Davie now aligned himself with was Pound's more international and cosmopolitan world view.

Davie has pursued his energetic advocacy of Pound in two books on the poet and in numerous articles. For him, Pound's *Cantos* are central to the contemporary situation of poetry. Davie doesn't sanction Pound's abominable politics: "Those of us who want to champion Pound," he has written in reference to Pound's anti-Semitism and fascism, "do him no service at all when we try to excuse the inexcusable." Yet he admires the American poet for having learned, after the early phase of aestheticism, to put the world before himself. As Davie wrote in *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (1964), in Pound's work "[n]ature exists as other, bodied against us, with real attributes and her own laws which it is our duty to observe."

One might think that this observation would apply just as well to the poetry of Yeats. But Davie doesn't think so. Later in *Ezra Pound: Poet As Sculptor*, he makes the following distinction:

Pound's repeated assertion [in Canto 83] that the paradise is *real* . . . is a conscious challenge to the whole symbolist aesthetic . . . Yeats can see Notre Dame as an artifact, a presence created in masonry and sculpture, only inside the symbol, only for the sake of what it answers to in him, not for what it is in itself. He must always arrange the perspective, and project upon the object the significance he can then read out of it. For Pound . . . this attitude is intolerable. Only when he sees stone in and for itself, the artist's working of it only a drawing out of what was latent in the stone to begin with, only then . . . can it save him.

In essence, then, Davie attempts to extract Pound from the Modernist movement and turn him into the foe of Eliot and Yeats. Thus, the famous passage in Canto 82—"Pull down thy vanity, it is not man / Made courage, or made order, or made grace"—is interpreted as a condemnation of Pound's earlier self and his former modernist confreres. ("The Pound of 1938," declares Davie, "is [in Canto 82] disowning the Pound of 1916.") Eliot, Yeats, and the early Pound all saw themselves (to paraphrase R. P. Blackmur) as adding to the stock of available reality. Davie joins the later Pound in deeming this attitude arrogant.

Davie maintains that Pound's qualms about transforming *The Cantos's* chips and shards of past civilizations into symbols are proof of his immense respect for the world. He finds the same quality, *respect*, in Pound's attempts at moral instruction in *The Cantos*. And yet, isn't there much in Pound's work that is personal in the worst sense—the anti-Semitism, for instance—far more personal, at any rate, than the supposedly solipsistic poems of Eliot or Yeats? And isn't Pound's poem a work of art, and not (as Davie sees it) some kind of tract for a new society, whatever reservations it contains about symbolism? And hasn't Pound salvaged these bits and pieces of the past precisely because—as Davie put it about the spurned Yeats—they answer something "in him," not for what they are in themselves?

Davie has also praised Thomas Hardy's poetry for this fundamental respect for the physical world, especially his feeling for topography and locality.

Yet it is worth noting that in praising Hardy's poetry in these terms, Davie has made him out to be Pound's aesthetic soul mate. This is an incredible claim. Yet Davie apparently believes that the author of *The Cantos*, like Hardy, "conceived of [a world that is] unchallengeably 'given' and final."

Davie's campaign against the followers of Eliot and Yeats—he labels them "post-symbolists"—continues in *Under Briggsflatts*. In an essay on "The Waste Land' Drafts and Transcripts," Davie remarks that Eliot was

a man who was never far from the solipsism that lay behind the *symboliste* endeavour, one for whom the psychological reality of private torments took priority over any reality which announced itself as social and public . . . [For Eliot] the physical and social landscape of London was no more than a screen on which to project a phantasmagoria that expressed his own personal disorders and desperations . . . whereas Pound seems to have supposed that the subject of ["The Waste Land"] was London in all its historical and geographical actuality.

Once more, the question of who is the more accomplished *poet*—Pound or Eliot—remains unanswered.

Having died in the First World War, Edward Thomas does not belong to the period Davie purports to cover in *Under Briggsflatts*, yet his work is revived here for a lashing. "[O]n a first or even a second reading," we read in "The Edward Thomas Centenary," "Thomas sounds much like any other 'Georgian.'" However, Davie dismisses Thomas for the same reason he dismisses Yeats and Eliot: for refusing to engage the world. What Thomas pursued, in Davie's view, was a fantasy of a charming and beneficent England. (The fantasy of the Modernists, alternatively, was to see in the world a mirror of their inner torments.) Davie writes that "[t]he pleasure we take in [Thomas's] poems cannot help but be . . . the soothing pleasure of make-believe. That is perhaps a legitimate pleasure; but it is certainly not the pleasure that we get from great poetry." Thomas eschewed the political and social demands of his time, and instead took refuge in his imagination. This, for Davie, is the final indignity.

Under Briggsflatts has other weaknesses too, among them Davie's claim in the foreword that "[h]aving in the past functioned as a critic, in this book I try to perform as a historian . . . I am not without . . . axes [to grind] . . . but in this book I have tried not to grind them." This is perversity itself: what critic has less of an axe to grind than Davie?

That mighty sculptor, time

by Marguerite Yourcenar

On the day when a statue is finished, its life, in a certain sense, begins. The first phase, in which it has been brought, by means of the sculptor's efforts, out of the block of stone into human shape, is over; a second phase, stretching across the course of centuries, through alternations of adoration, admiration, love, hatred, and indifference, and successive degrees of erosion and attrition, will bit by bit return it to the state of unformed mineral mass out of which its sculptor had taken it.

It goes without saying that we do not possess a single Greek statue in the state in which its contemporaries knew it: we can barely discern, here and there on the hair of a Kore or a Kouros of the sixth century, the traces of reddish color, like palest henna, which attest to their pristine character of painted statues alive with the intense, almost terrifying life of mannequins and idols which also happen to be masterpieces of art. Those hard objects fashioned in imitation of the forms of organic life have, in their own way, undergone the equivalent of fatigue, age, and unhappiness. They have changed in the way time changes us. Their maltreatment by Christians or barbarians, the conditions under which they have spent their centuries of abandonment underground until discovery has given them back to us, the sagacious or ill-advised restorations from which they have benefited or suffered, the accumulation of dirt and the true or false patina—everything, including the atmospheric

conditions of the museums in which they are today imprisoned, leaves its mark on their bodies of metal or stone.

Some of these alterations are sublime. To that beauty imposed by the human brain, by an epoch, or by a particular form of society, they add an involuntary beauty, associated with the hazards of history, which is the result of natural causes and of time. Statues so thoroughly shattered that out of the debris a new work of art is born: a naked foot unforgettably resting on a stone; a candid hand; a bent knee which contains all the speed of the foot race; a torso which has no face to prevent us from loving it; a breast or genitals in which we recognize more fully than ever the form of a fruit or a flower; a profile in which beauty survives with a complete absence of human or divine anecdote; a bust with eroded features, halfway between a portrait and a death's head. This blurred body is like a block of stone rough-hewn by the waves; that mutilated fragment hardly differs from a stone or a pebble washed up on some Aegean beach. Yet the expert does not hesitate: a line which is worn away, a curve which is lost here and re-emerges there can only result from a human hand, a Greek hand, which

This essay will appear in *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, by Marguerite Yourcenar, forthcoming from Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Translation copyright © 1990 by Walter Kaiser. Originally published in French; copyright © 1983 by Editions Gallimard.

labored in one specific spot during one specific century. The entire man is there—his intelligent collaboration with the universe, his struggle against it, and that final defeat in which the mind and the matter which supported him perish almost at the same time. What he intended affirms itself forever in the ruin of things.

Those statues which have been exposed to the sea-wind have the whiteness and porosity of a crumbling block of salt; others, like the lions of Delos, have ceased to be animal effigies and have become blached fossils, bones in the sunlight at the edge of the sea. The gods of the Parthenon, affected by the atmosphere of London, little by little are turning into cadavers and ghosts. The statues reconstituted and repatinated by eighteenth-century restorers, made to harmonize with the shimmering parquets and polished mirrors of papal or princely palaces, have an air of pomp and elegance which is not antique but evocative, rather, of the festivities at which they were present, marble gods retouched according to the taste of the period standing side by side with ephemeral gods of flesh. Even their fig leaves clothe them like the dress of that time. Lesser works which people have not taken the trouble to shelter in galleries or in pavilions made for them, quietly abandoned beneath a plane tree or beside a fountain, ultimately acquire the majesty or the languor of a tree or a plant: that shaggy faun is a moss-covered tree trunk; this bending nymph is indistinguishable from the woodbine that embraces her.

Still others owe their beauty to human violence: the push toppling them from their pedestals or the iconoclast's hammer has made them what they are. The classical work of art is thus infused with pathos; the mutilated gods have the air of martyrs. Sometimes, the erosion of the elements and the brutality of man unite to create an unwonted appearance which belongs to no school or time: headless and armless, separated from her recently discovered hand, worn away by all the squalls of the Sporades, the Victory of Samothrace has become not

so much woman as pure sea-wind and sky. One bogus aspect of modern art comes from these involuntary transformations of ancient art: the Psyche in the Museo Nazionale of Naples with her skull cut cleanly off, horizontally cloven, has the appearance of a Rodin; a decapitated torso turning on its base recalls a Despiau or a Maillol. What our sculptors today imitate by willful abstraction and, moreover, with the help of cunning artifice, is there intimately bound to the fate of the statue itself. Each wound helps us to reconstruct a crime and sometimes even to discover its causes.

That emperor's face received a hammer-blow on a certain day of revolt or was rechiseled to serve for his successor. A rock thrown by a Christian castrated that god or broke his nose. Out of greed, someone extracted the eyes of precious stone from this divine head, thus leaving it with the cast of a blind man. A German mercenary boasted that he had tumbled that colossus with one shove of his shoulders during a night of pillage. Sometimes the Barbarians are responsible, sometimes the Crusaders, sometimes the Turks; sometimes the lansquenets of Charles V and sometimes the soldiers of Napoleon; and Stendhal was later moved to tears at the sight of the Hermaphrodite with a broken foot. A world of violence turns about these calm forms.

Our ancestors restored statues; we remove from them their false noses and prosthetic devices; our descendants will, in turn, no doubt do something else. Our present attitude represents both a gain and a loss. The need to refashion a complete statue with artificial members resulted in part from the naïve desire to possess and exhibit an object in perfect condition, which is inherent to all ages because of the simple vanity of the owners. But that taste for excessive restoration which all great collectors from the time of the Renaissance down to our own day have possessed surely arises from profounder causes than ignorance, convention, and the vulgar bias in favor of a fair copy. Our forebears—perhaps more human than we and with different sensibilities, at

least in the domain of art, from which they hardly demanded more than pleasurable sensations—found it hard to put up with mutilated masterpieces and with marks of violence and death on gods of stone. The great lovers of antiquities restored out of piety. Out of piety, we undo what they did. But possibly we are more accustomed to ruins and wounds. We are suspicious of any continuity of taste or of human spirit which would permit Thorvaldsen to repair Praxiteles. We more easily accept that this beauty, so remote from us and lodged in museums rather than in our homes, should be a dead beauty or a beauty made of fragments. And finally, our sense of the pathetic is gratified by these bruises; our predilection for abstract art causes us to like those lacunae and fractures which tend to neutralize the forceful human element in this statuary. Of all the changes caused by time, none affects statues more than the shifts of taste in their admirers.

A form of transformation more striking than any other is that undergone by statues which have fallen to the bottom of the sea. The vessels which carried work commissioned from a sculptor from one port to another, the galleys into which the Roman conquerors crammed their Greek loot to transport it to Rome, or else to take it along with them to Constantinople when Rome became less sure, sometimes went down with all hands. Some of those shipwrecked

bronzes, fished up in good condition like a drowned man revived in time, have acquired from their subaqueous sojourn nothing more than a beautiful greenish patina—as, for example, the Ephebe of Marathon or those two powerful athletes from Erice found recently. Fragile marble statues, on the other hand, emerge gnawed or eaten away, corroded, decorated with baroque volutes sculpted by the caprice of the tides, or encrusted with shells like those boxes we bought at the seaside in our childhood. The forms and gestures the sculptor gave them proved to be only a brief episode between their incalculable duration as rock in the bosom of the mountain and their long existence as stone lying at the bottom of the sea. They have passed through this decomposition without pain, through this loss without death, through this survival without resurrection, as does all matter freed to obey its own laws. They no longer belong to us. Like that corpse in the most beautiful and haunting of Shakespeare's songs, they have suffered a sea-change into something rich and strange. That Neptune, a good workshop copy intended to decorate the quay of a small town whose fishermen would offer him their first catch, has descended now to the realm of Neptune. This Celestial Venus, or Venus of the Crossways, has become the Aphrodite of the Sea.

—*translated from the French*
by *Walter Kaiser*

Mencken's anti-Semitism

To the Editors:

In "Mencken vs. Mencken" (May 1990) Terry Teachout says that Mencken was, "at worst, a rather mild social anti-Semite."

In the 1930s an atmosphere of socially accepted anti-Semitism made many otherwise intelligent people indifferent to the oppression of European Jewry. The Nazis would not have proceeded to exterminate the Jews had they not been assured of the indifference of the Western powers.

Mr. Teachout says that Mencken must have been "shaken" by the Germans' use of science for the purpose of mass murder. How can we know that he was shaken? Because he said nothing—he was silent. It is hard to accept this as an argument for his compassion.

Mr. Teachout urges those who are "untroubled by the endless scruples of 'sensitivity'" to read Mencken. Those are certainly the people Mencken appeals to. Others who are too "sensitive," especially Jews, will find much in his writing to offend them.

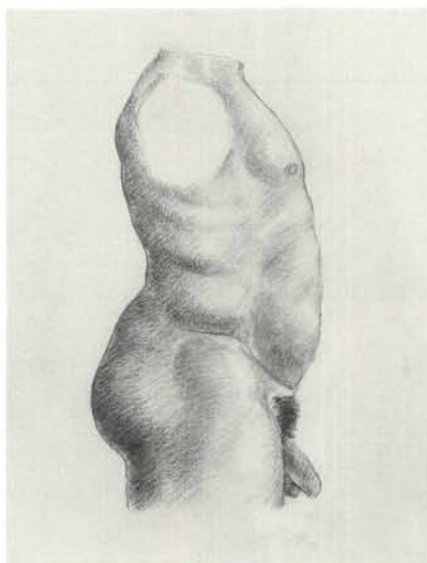
Louis Simpson
Setauket, NY

Terry Teachout replies:

Louis Simpson is certainly entitled to differ with my interpretation of H. L. Mencken's postwar silence on the Holocaust, but it is wrong of him to assume that Mencken was "indifferent to the oppression of European Jewry" in the Thirties. I did not discuss this question in detail in "Mencken vs. Mencken" because I knew that many other writers would do so in the wake of the publication of the diaries. In fact, Mencken publicly urged early in 1939 that the U.S. "give refuge to the German Jews" by "bringing them in by the first available ships, and staking them sufficiently to set them on their feet," as Joseph Epstein points out in "Mencken on Trial," published in the April issue of *Commentary*. As for Mr. Simpson's vicious attempt to imply that I am insensitive to anti-Semitism because I find Mencken appealing, the fact that so distinguished a literary critic as Mr. Epstein, who also finds Mencken appealing, exonerates him of the charge of anti-Semitism—and that a magazine published by the American Jewish Committee saw fit to publish that exoneration—seems to me sufficient response for now. I am planning to write a biography of Mencken in which I will discuss this and other related matters at greater length.

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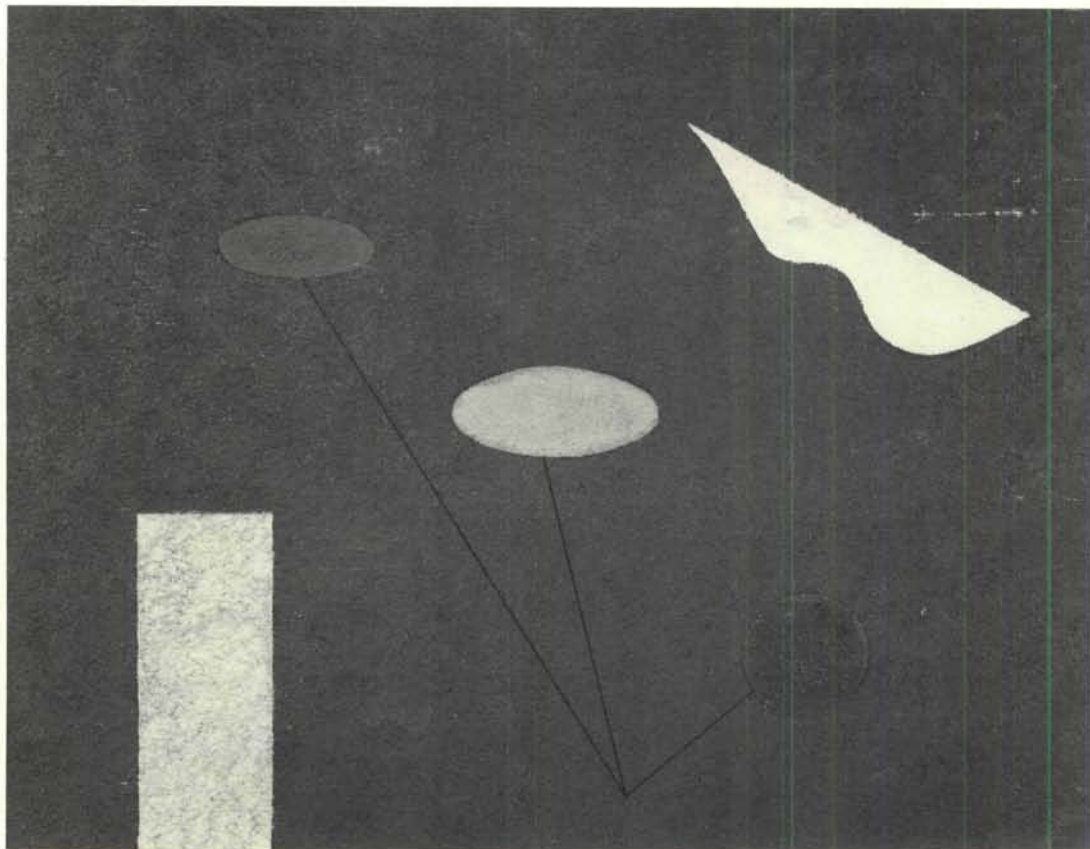
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